

NIGHT TERRORS

ISSUE #1

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FROM THE EDITOR

As a child, did you ever read a story or watch a movie with scenes so real, so disturbing that they followed you to bed, hid in your closet and, chuckling, dared you to fall asleep? As an adult you may think those nights are behind you. Well, *they're back*.

NIGHT TERRORS was spawned from dual frustrations. From a writer's standpoint I was frustrated at finding paying markets for the type of horror, occult and supernatural work that I loved to write. From a reader's point of view, it seemed that there were many magazines publishing mean horror: slash and rape, blood and gore sensationalism that leave you wanting to wash your hands. At the same time, the novels and collected works that were selling large numbers were those by writers with names like Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and Joyce Carol Oats. These authors write stories that flow through you, electrifying rather than bouncing off nerve endings. They write what I like to call literate horror, stories I like to read and stories that I pray to God I will someday write.

So, before you is NIGHT TERRORS, as literate and as literary a horror, supernatural, occult magazine, as you will ever see, and at the same time, a magazine that will leave you sleeping with a night light.

The writers for Issue #1 are a select group. Combined they have published over 1600 short stories and poems, thirteen novels and books and numerous chapbooks and collections. And since NIGHT TERRORS is all fiction and art, you will find more to read between it's covers than most magazines twice its size. Future issues will contain more of the same.

If you bought a single issue, I hope you will come back for more. If you have comments or suggestions, I hope you will write.

I can't close without thanking my wife Joan for her help and support and for putting up with all the hours that I've spent putting this all together.

Dominick Cancilla is a typesetter and sometimes horror writer who lives with his long-suffering wife in Santa Monica, California. His work has appeared in many genre magazines including two appearances in CEMETERY DANCE. Fans will find his work in the upcoming ROBERT BLOCH'S PSYCHOS, BENDING THE LANDSCAPE, 365 SCARY STORIES, and IDLE HANDS anthologies.

APRON STRINGS

by

DOMINICK CANCELLA

Isaac wasn't surprised when he was woken from fitful sleep by the telephone, but he let it ring some thirty times before he gave in and answered. He'd been sleeping with the lights on, so there was no fumbling for the cordless handset on the bedside table. The little beep that the phone used to draw the line between evocation and conversation stabbed painfully into Isaac's still-forming hangover when he pushed the "answer" button.

He didn't bother saying hello, just waited for the song to begin.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you —"

Isaac had dropped the hand holding the receiver to the covers after thumbing open the connection, so the singing was tinny and distant. He'd suffered through this call enough times in his nightmares that the genuine article was nothing more than another in a series of reruns. The stale tune filled him with the same sense of dread and unreality whether he was awake or asleep.

"Happy birthday dear Isaac —"

The song was in a voice full of the forced cheerfulness typical of a woman trying to show the world that she was having a wonderful time, despite her situation. Its timbre suggested heavy smoking or, perhaps, one too many drinks.

"— happy birthday to you! The performance ended in silence heavy with anticipation, but Isaac could not bring himself to fill it. Instead, he sat with his eyes closed, wrestling with the moment of peace, trying to hold onto it until it stretched into unconsciousness, oblivion.

"Ikey? Are you there?" The sound of her voice seemed to surround Isaac. His eyes snapped open, his bedroom suddenly feeling more prison than sanctuary. With a pained frowning of his brow, Isaac hauled his heavy body up into a sitting position, the warm flannel of his sheets falling away from the salt and pepper hair on his chest. He felt as if he'd just done his four-hundredth sit-up.

The phone was like a barbell in his hand as he raised it to his ear. "Hi, Mom," he said when his lips brushed the mouthpiece, his voice thick, his throat dry and coated with sleep.

In the moment before his mother responded, Isaac could hear her take a quick, half-startled sip of air, a sign of her pleasure at the sound of his voice. "Forty-three years ago tonight, Ikey," she said, "your father and I were sitting in a private room at St. Ann's. They let him sit with me because he was such a prominent surgeon." The reference to Isaac senior was laden with the same puffed-with-pride *my son the doctor* tone that she had always used when referring to Isaac himself.

Isaac's inner voice droned along with his mother's words,

matching each syllable and inflection, echoing like a stale top-forty tune heard one-too-many times. Back when her calls were still a new thing to Isaac, he had wondered how, after all these years, she could continue to tell the story with such enthusiasm, but he had long ago stopped wondering anything about his mother. She lived for this night, and that was his cross to bear.

"It hurt and I remember crying out," she continued, "but it was with a smile because I was thinking about you all the time. I remember that I started laughing near the end, because I suddenly got a picture of myself lying there with my feet up in the stirrups, in that hulbous gown, all sweaty with my hair plastered to my head, yelling, pushing and smiling all at once." She laughed along with her story, calling to Isaac's mind the image of a teenage girl slipping over the edge of madness, convincing herself that she was not being raped.

"For a minute I swear your father thought I was going to burst a blood vessel right there on the birthing table." She laughed again, her sharp chuckles rising and falling in pitch as she enjoyed the over worry of her long-ago spouse. It made Isaac want to curl into himself.

The laugh exacerbated the pressure that filled Isaac's head, not because of its sharpness or volume, but because of its very existence. A metal band encircled his lungs, and drawing breath became a chore that didn't seem worth the trouble of performing. He turned his head, searched the room for comfort.

On the table beside the bed, near where the phone had lay in wait, was a silver-framed photograph of a woman in wedding white. She had sea-blue eyes, smooth skin, long brown hair. It caught Isaac's eye, took him away from the voice for a moment. Maria had helped him through his birthday nights for more than a decade before his mother finally got to her. Dealing with his mother alone after so many years of having a band to hold magnified the experience somehow, made it even more unbearable.

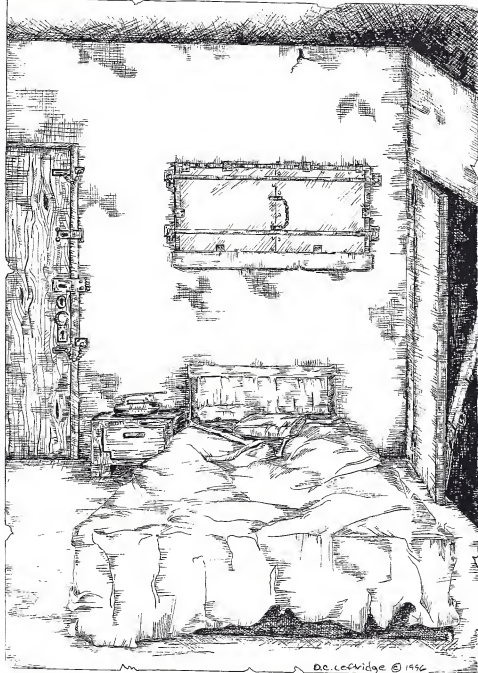
Isaac's hand crushed the photo's glass and the scar on his wrist — a memento of his first birthday as a widower — winked at him in reflection. There was nothing that could ease his mind but silence.

"Mom, please," Isaac whispered through clenched teeth, "I know the story."

His first words cut the laughter short.

After a moment, she spoke, to fill the hole. "Of course you do Ikey, but it's a *tradition*." The last word was all whine and mock disappointment.

At least, Isaac thought, she wasn't upset. His mother's emotional state had become more disjointed and unpredictable



each year, and Isaac was a good many birthdays beyond trying to predict how she would react to his words or, for that matter, truly caring beyond how her mood effected him.

They sat in silence and it was like a panacea. The band around his chest began to loosen, returning Isaac's breath to him. His head began to clear. Just as calm was coming within reach, Isaac felt the first hitching pre-sob breaths of an advancing storm grab at him through the phone lines.

The iron bands constricted and Isaac's thumb twitched as it rested on the disconnect button but resisted the temptation to sever the connection. In any case, it would have made little difference if he had given in.

"Oh, Ikey," his mother sobbed. "I only wanted the best for you."

He said nothing.

The room had begun to spin again, slowly, gently, in rhythm with the pressure in Isaac's head. He tried to pretend that it was a dream, to convince himself that it would all be over soon.

"I was so careful the whole time you were in me. I wanted you to be healthy, happy. I wanted you to be a good boy. Where did I go wrong, Ikey? Where?"

It was a rhetorical question. A light-headed pre-panic euphoria enveloped Isaac. He felt almost as if he were floating.

"Why don't you ever come see me, Ikey?" She was becoming hysterical, straining each word out as if constipated.

Isaac hated it when his mother spoke to him like this. The colors of the room around him shifted, showing him a picture of himself, visiting her — on Mother's Day — on her birthday — but only because he knew that his own birthday calls would get worse if he didn't. She heard his thoughts.

"Ikey, you come to look at me, but you never see me. You never talk to me. Not really. You never tell me when good things happen to you. Why, Ikey?"

Isaac fell back in the bed, let his pillow sop the sweat from his neck. He kept the phone next to his ear, waiting for her to tire and drift away, trying to lose himself in delusion. Panic was rising, filling his head with oxygen-thin blood. He could hear his doctor's voice somewhere in the back of his mind talking about his blood pressure, his ulcer, telling him to avoid stress.

If only he could appease her, just for this one night. Isaac tried to imagine something good that he would want to share with his mother. . . but all he could see was Maria lying on the bathroom floor and himself slipping on her blood, watching the slash in her wrist rush up toward him as if it were a mouth trying to steal a kiss.

The sobs were rhythmic in Isaac's ear for a long while and then they began to fade. "You will always be my baby, Ikey," she was almost whispering now, trying to control her emotions. "My forever baby." Wistful. Melancholy. "I wanted to hold onto you so bad that in the end the doctor had to take you out of me. Did you know that, Ikey?"

He did. The pressure lowered with the volume and Isaac was in his room again. The brass and silver of the locks on his bedroom door caught his attention, and he tried to concentrate on them, to use them as an anchor to reality. If he could be calm, she would soon be gone. If he panicked again, spoke ill to her, then it would stretch on and on. In the back of his mind, Isaac wished for a knife.

"The pain was horrible and I pushed but part of me couldn't let go. The doctor had to give me medicine to put me out, and I

think he must have given me too much, but it still wasn't enough to take you away from me completely. Was it?"

She was calm. He was calm. The knife came forward in Isaac's mind, cut his throat. A peaceful, silent, seeping death. It would be over in no more than a few minutes...and then sleep. This time, he'd be sure that nobody found him. Isaac closed his eyes, lay back, immersing himself in the dream, and let the phone rest loose in his fingers.

"You're still my baby, Ikey. Aren't you?"

She said nothing for a moment.

"I want to see you, Ikey," she was whispering again, meek. "I want to come visit you."

Isaac's eyes snapped open as if he had been awoken by the misstep of an intruder in another room. "No," he shouted into the receiver. His voice was a croak, a bark, much too loud, too uncontrolled. He wrenched himself up in bed. "I'll come by tomorrow. I'll bring flowers —" but the time for those words was already past.

"No," she cut him off, scolding again, the old pattern. "You don't keep your promises, Ikey. That's your father in you. That's what I get for allowing you to be brought up under his hand." Full of resolve, venom. Her voice turned to gravel. "I should have held on tighter, Ikey. You can't keep a mother from her boy." The words should have been sad or resigned, but they came out like daggers.

Sounds of movement came through the phone: a rustle, a crackle, followed by soft, slow scraping, like an old dog digging in a flower bed. Isaac thumbed the device off as he yanked his numbing body out of the bed, but the phone began to ring as soon as the connection was broken. He dropped it to the bed and ran on bare feet across cold wood to the bedroom door.

The door was solid oak with steel hinges — hand crafted and just under a year old. Isaac tried to filter out the sound of the telephone and concentrate his attention on checking the locks, one after the other.

With his confidence in the door reassured, Isaac checked the window above his bed. Past the glass, the iron-reinforced storm windows were closed and bolted into the window frame in eight places from the inside. The rest of the house was similarly barricaded.

Through the windows Isaac could hear the wind, feel the cold air. But nothing more than that could get through them — of that he was certain.

But if she did?

If she did, he was lost.

Isaac had a shotgun in the closet, but experience had taught him the wisdom of leaving it there. Unless he wanted to end his own part in this horrific play, bullets were of no use.

Half an hour after it started, the telephone stopped ringing.

There was nothing left to do but wait.

Isaac would sit at the end of his bed in silence. Tense. Alert. Jumping at every creak of his house, every gust of wind past the window.

And the waiting would only end when Isaac opened the shutters to the rising sun, or when he felt the cold, loving embrace of his mother and lost his mind in the earthy stench of her perfume. NT

N. K. Hoffman is the sixth of seven children. She grew up in Southern California but has spent the last 20 years in Idaho and Oregon. Her novels include *THE THREAD THAT BINDS THE BONES* and *THE SILENT STRENGTH OF STONES*. Her short stories have appeared in more than 150 places, mostly in anthologies and magazines, sometimes in French. She lives with four cats and a mannequin in a house that looks normal from the outside. *WORKS OF ART* first appeared in *PULPHOUSE* #1, 1988.

WORKS OF ART

by

NINA KIRIKI HOFFMAN

Sally was sitting on the artwork again. For several minutes, she didn't notice I was home. I watched her perching on one branch and caressing another, her eyes closed, her face serene. I felt an ache in my belly that had nothing to do with menstrual cramps. She already loved the artwork more than she loved me; how was she going to survive its destruction? How was I?

The artwork was the first thing I saw every night when I came home from being an accountant and opened the door to the apartment. We had taken all the furniture out of the living room to make space for it. Cerveza, the artist, installed it himself; it had to be brought in pieces and reassembled. It was pale wood, the kind advertisers call blonde, and branchy — twisting limbs going this way and that, rising from a central point on the floor and spreading up and out. To really appreciate the thing you had to climb around on it and study all the carvings. Some of them I could recognize — a face here, a bas-relief of a crane in flight there — but many more seemed random designs. Some of the carvings were in narrow crevices between limbs and could not be seen, only touched.

When we first got it, I spent a lot of time with the artwork too; shapes that it printed themselves on my dreams. I found myself doodling them on scratch pads at work. When I rubbed my eyes, I stopped seeing little purple stars; I saw a field of carved faces or an Escher-like checkerboard of birds turning to clouds. During my thrice-weekly workout at the gym, started since we got the artwork, I imagined shapes pressing against my palms as I lifted weights; I felt hand-carved information speaking to the soles of my feet as I peddled the Exercycle.

I perceived the artwork in bits and pieces. But Sally, ah... Sally, who worked at her loom at home, tried to tell me about the work's Gestalt — how it all fit together, a tree of life, the story of the evolution of consciousness, the growth of the ability to dream. She wove more trees into her tapestries, and other shapes I recognized from the artwork. And her weavings got better; she had better gallery showings, and sold more tapestries. "Art, like a chromosome, needs to replicate," she said, "to create its own copies and spread out where it can reach everyone and transform them. Heisenberg had it backwards. The experiment exists only to affect the observers."

Half the time I didn't know what she was talking about. All I knew was that I loved her, whatever she said and did.

"Lucy," she said, when she finally noticed me standing by the front door that night, "come and feel this. There's a sequence here —" She twisted between the limbs, ducked under the branch

nearest the front door, grabbed my hands and pulled me into the embrace of the artwork.

We eled our way over and under branches to the far corner of the room, where we had once kept an aquarium. Like a teacher at a school for the blind, she took my hand and placed it on the underside of a branch. A rounded dome swelled against my palm. She moved my hand inward along the branch toward the core of the tree, and I felt a dome punctured. I explored with my fingers and realized a spiral started on one edge and wound its way to the heart of the dome. Again she pushed my hand to a swelling on the branch. I felt a curled pattern — the dome spiraled and chambered like a nautilus.

"Now," said Sally. She pulled me away from that branch and put my hand against the central trunk. I felt a concavity under my hand. I closed my eyes and pressed my fingers into it. Was it the shape of a bi-lobed brain, or a four-chambered heart? The divisions were so subtle.

"Do you understand?" she asked.

I felt like a blind student asked to make an intuitive leap. Dome. Spiral. Chambered spiral. Brain. "No," I said. I no longer wanted to understand the artwork. Cerveza sold it to us two years before; it cost us Sally's large legacy from her grandparents and the whole of my IRA, minus penalties for early withdrawal. By now Cerveza must be almost finished with his next piece, and just before he completed it, he would come to us to fulfill the final clause in the contract. Only one finished Cerveza piece ever existed at a time. He believed that to balance the creative and destructive energies, he must destroy each of his creations. "What if I created and created, never destroying anything?" he had said at a lecture Sally and I went to, back when we still held hands in public. "What if each of my creations were better than the last? I would be making a vortex, sucking all the creative energy out of the cosmos around me, and a balance of destructive energy would fill the resultant vacuum. Who knows? If the work were great enough, the destructive energy could express itself in another war! So, always, I balance the use of the energies."

Sally understood his lecture, or said she did. When we bid on the work at the auction and captured it, she spoke with Cerveza, saying his integrity impressed her and she would cherish the artwork even more, knowing its ephemeral nature.

Since we got it home, she had been developing theories of her own — as had I. "The artwork," she said that night, "the artwork is about evolution. What is evolution but higher orders of

organization? Energy organized in increasingly complex ways. The defeat of chaos. So maybe there is a balance, but it tilts. Why shouldn't there be two Cervezas at once?" She jumped up on one branch and briefly bugged another. "Proliferation —" she said, waving at the branches, which rose from a central trunk, to spread and fill the upper part of the room. "Expansion. He's telling us, through this, that his focus has changed. If we put more creative energy out into the environment, maybe it can send the destructive energy away. If destruction feeds on itself and grows, why shouldn't creation? Isn't it time we tipped the balance the other direction?"

I took her hand and kissed the palm. I loved her enthusiasm, her intensity, her focus. She gave me a smile and touched my cheek.

"I bought artichokes," I said. I glanced over my shoulder toward the front door, where I had abandoned my bag of groceries when she led me to her discovery.

"You darling," she said, and tugged a lock of my crimped hair. I had been trying different hair colors for the past two years. Just now it was ash blonde, pale as the artwork's branches.

"You like?" I said.

"The best yet. Suits you."

"I got another tattoo."

She looked distressed. She didn't understand why I started getting tattoos — another recent habit. I knew sometimes in bed she found herself fascinated and excited by them and she felt ashamed later. All these things she did not say aloud, but her body spoke to me.

"Where is it this time?" she asked.

I rolled up my sleeve and showed her the gauze bandage on the inside of my left forearm. "A phoenix," I said, "four colors." I smiled at her. She would be curious, waiting for the scabs to heal, wondering how skillful Dead-eye Dick had been this time. There would be an itch in her that might coax her attention away from the artwork for a little while and bring her focus back to me. And that would be good. "I'll go cook supper now," I said.

She nodded. She stood on a branch and reached up for the one above. She closed her eyes and stroked the branch, searching for hidden meanings.

Cerveza's call came four days later.

"Can we meet you for tea somewhere?" Sally asked. I watched her face as she listened to his reply. Her blue eyes narrowed, then widened, tear-bright. "No, I —" she said. A pause. She bit her lower lip. "You don't understand. Your art cries out to be preserved."

She waited. She squeezed her eyes shut and tears spilled out. When she opened her eyes, she stared at the ceiling, twisting the phone's coiled cord around her wrist and pulling it tight. "Denial," she whispered. "Very well." She hung up the phone as though it were an egg and might crack if mishandled.

"Oh, Lucy," she whispered.

I went to her and offered what comfort I could.

When her sobs slowed, she said, "He's coming tomorrow morning, with an axe."

I woke, showered, and called in sick.

In the kitchen, I stared at a tapestry Sally had made me before anyone knew her work: an olive-green artichoke, its leaves slightly open at the top to show the tiniest fuzz of violet from its flowering heart. "You're like that," she said to me then, two months before we moved in together. "This beautiful flower, this colored fire, locked inside prickly leaves."

I loved her for seeing me that way. Everyone else had touched the prickles and backed away.

I stroked the silky weaving. How carefully she worked. This wool came from Iceland, and had a sheen and softness all its own. She dyed it herself, using natural substances. She called this art forth, as if a person could spin yarn from clouds — she the spindle, summoning wool from her subconscious, spinning it into a solid thing she could weave and shape. That a person who had so much inner fire could look away from herself long enough to see and treasure the fire in me had never ceased to amaze me.

I drank a glass of orange juice and went to the living room.

Sally had spent the night climbing over the artwork. "He said naturally I must mourn it," she told me when she had calmed enough to eat supper. "Of course I want to deny that it's going. He didn't even want to hear my theories. He said everybody tries to talk him out of doing it, but he knows what he believes. So if you don't mind, Lucy, I'd like to spend this last night — studying it, as much as I can."

Of course I didn't mind.

She had come to bed at last, exhausted, just at sunrise.

I went to the core of the artwork and hugged one of its branches. It seemed to be made just for me to hug — smooth, warm, knobbed with bumps that fit perfectly into my embrace. Against my stomach I felt a shape printing itself on my skin. After a moment, I let go of the branch and knelt to see what the shape was. An embryo so young I couldn't tell what species it might be.

I went to our bathroom and stood studying myself in the mirror. In two years I had firmed and perfected my figure, following a body-building regimen at the gym that always demanded a little more of me than I wanted to give, until I remembered why I wanted to give it. A small green tattooed frog sat like a jewel on my right hip. A rose opened red petals around my navel. The phoenix on my left forearm had healed into beauty and a snake curled around my upper right arm like a bright bangle.

My pale crimped hair hung down to my shoulders. I made a thin plait on the left side, threading three brass beads into my hair weaving. Should I add makeup? My face looked pale, in concert with the rest of me. No. After two years, I was finished. I smiled at myself, satisfied with the work I had done.

I put on the red robe Sally had given me for my birthday. Then I went to the living room, to buddle against the artwork's trunk and wait for Cerveza.

The morning light was chill in the room. The artwork looked like bones in the touch of the cooled sun. I wondered whether my plan would work, whether I wanted it to work.

A knock sounded on the door. Sally cried out in her sleep. I got up and opened the door for Cerveza.

He was a tall man, rough and grizzled, with long earlobes and a high bulging forehead. His eyes under his out-thrust brow looked

dark and precious, jewels in a crevice. His mouth was broad, with deep brackets on either side of it. Black and gray stubble forested his chin and cheeks. He wore a green coverall and carried an axe.

I stepped out into the hall and closed the door.

"What is it?" he asked. His voice had a comforting rumble, like a sleepy hive of bees.

"I want —" I said. "I've worked —" I looked at the axe. It looked old and used, its head darkened with age, though the blade shone in arcs from a recent bout with a whetstone. The wooden handle looked smoothed and oiled with the sweat of palms. "Does it have to be your art?"

"What?"

"Suppose you destroyed someone else's art? Would that make it all right for two of your pieces to exist at once?"

"I have no right to anyone else's art. And if it isn't good enough to make up for the new one, what use is it?"

I felt a chill in the pit of my belly. It would be so easy to open the door and let him in, and his axe with him. Listening to Sally sobbing for days and nights afterwards, though — that would be too hard. "But if it is good enough, and if it's offered to you freely?" I said.

He looked at me for a long moment. He blinked.

I straightened. I let the robe slide to the floor, and stood, feet planted firmly, my hands outstretched before me. "This is what I have," I said. I looked down at the slope of my breasts. I glanced at the phoenix on my arm, its blue and green tail feathers and wings outspread. I clenched a fist and the muscles of my upper arm bulged.

"What a piece of work..."

I looked up at him again.

"Mine to destroy?" he said. I did not understand the tone of his voice. It had a curious waiting flatness in it.

I nodded.

"All right," he said.

"I just want to leave her a note," I said.

"No." He leaned his axe against the wall and pulled my robe up around me. "Come," he said, retrieving his axe and taking my arm.

His studio was in a warehouse, windowless and huge. In the center of it was the work in progress, carved limbs again, but this time not a tree; it was like a skeleton, if a human skeleton had had the stature of a dinosaur; and it was like an unfinished house, a framework without walls or roof; and even as I thought these things, made these labels, I noticed something that made the labels lies — no one thing, just a final detail that made the images wrong. I walked to the artwork and touched it. Its surface was rough and abraded; my fingers brought away several splinters.

I looked at Cerveza.

"You are greater than anything I could create," he said. "I wonder I didn't think of this before. How it hurt me to kill all my children...what is your name?"

"Lucy," I said. My throat felt dry. "Lucia Vanessa Nike."

"Luvani," he said. "I will name this one after you."

But it's so ugly, I thought. I wondered if Sally would understand it. I thought of the fresh pain of the tattoo needle, the ache in my arm after Dead-eye Dick finished my phoenix.

I thought of Sally's beautiful face, her contented smile as she sat on the artwork, the joy she got from discovering something else

about it. That piece deserved to live — more, I thought, than this one did. Cerveza could name this one after me, but I thought of Sally's piece as mine. I remembered the press of the embryo shape against my stomach. What species?

Artwork.

How many mothers could choose their children?

I leaned back against a splintery limb and watched, smiling, as Cerveza raised his axe. NT



Original Artwork

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Ken Goldman has stories in over 70 publications. He received The Small Press Genre Association 1994 Best New Writer nomination, and has won contests sponsored by Rod Sterling Memorial Foundation, Ebbing Tide, and Beyond the Moon. He received an honorable mention in Ellen Datlow and Terry Windling's YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR SEVENTH EDITION. His stories have appeared in recent issues of LORE, TERMINAL FRIGHT, WHITE KNUCKLES, OUTER DARKNESS, BLACK MOON, THE BLUE LADY, and RICTUS. Ken teaches a course on Horror and Science Fiction in Film and Literature in Philadelphia.

GULL TENDER

by

KEN GOLDMAN

Hollis kicked up his feet over the railing of the sun deck and sipped his morning coffee as he leaned back to watch the pretty young thing below him tossing scraps of bread to the sea gulls on the beach. It was hard to believe that this nubile child was the same girl whose ankles he had worn around his neck the previous night. Skye's lovemaking had made his silk sheets sing for the better part of the midnight hours just as she had done throughout the past three months. But in the grey light of early dawn the women had metamorphosed back into a little girl as she fed the gulls, a wonderfully trusting child surrounded by what must have been dozens of the shrieking birds.

Because Rockport mornings had sharp teeth in the early fall, Skye had wrapped herself in Hollis' Boston College sweats to brace herself against the brisk Massachusetts wind. She tossed the bread crusts to the gulls while only inches from her face the birds flapped and screeched as they dove for the morsels. Several dive-bombed to retrieve the scraps at the girl's bare feet, and the honey blond seemed to disappear in the midst of the scavenging creatures, absorbed in the delight of that moment and oblivious to the world beyond those hungry gulls.

When it came to the jock junkies, Hollis supposed women of the '90s were pretty much the same as the star fuckers of previous decades. He hoped Skye was different because he liked this one. But the Quebec Icemen had attracted more than a few pretty young women like Skye Tyler, women barely out of their teens who waited by the team's locker room door for a fleeting glance at the men who carried the big sticks, women who were willing to hitch a lot more than their wagons to a star.

In a few days the franchise would be off to Boston to smack around the puck with the Bruins. These were the early days of a hockey season that had seen the fledgling team from Quebec turn more than a few heads thanks to the Icemen's rookie goal tender who wore number 12. Dack Hollis' stick had personally caused more than a few forwards from the Flames and the Oilers to chew on their gonads every time they entered the crease. From all appearances it seemed that this season Lord Stanley's Cup was going to belong to the new kids on the block, and along the way there were quite a few perks for the rising young star who guarded the net of the twenty-fifth team to enter the NHL. Among those perks was the sweet young thing who was feeding the sea gulls on the beach below.

Somewhere Hollis always connected these private moments of rumination to the game. Those competing sea gulls were like himself and his teammates facing the opposition on the ice, Hollis thought. Among the gulls the bread crumb of choice seemed

always the one in Skye's hand, and the feuding birds went after it like the speeding stickmen who raced after the treasured puck, creating a feathery face-off that consisted of slashes and stabs at the most recent bread scrap that the girl had dropped on the ground, a no-bolds-barred combat lasting until one of them had it.

An ugly fat gull yanked a chunky crust from the beak of a smaller bird, screeched its victory at its defeated opponent, and flew off. Hollis could almost bear the point buzzer go off inside his head as he whispered "Score!" into his coffee mug.

Well, wasn't survival what the game was all about? Dack Hollis felt fortunate to be so much better at it than most, certainly better than most of the Canadian clowns with whom he had exchanged his bridgework in this sport. Just as those gibbering sea gulls had demonstrated the ethics of survival, a lesson also could be learned from the goalie who protected the crease on the ice. The trick to surviving was not to let that damned puck interfere with your life. You had to smack it out of your world no matter what, and if it kept coming, then you just kept swinging double-time at the fucker until it went away.

That kind of thinking had carried the kid from the small town of Audbury, Massachusetts to the ice rinks at Boston City College and ultimately to this private retreat up the coast of the Massachusetts shore line. In a few years he could have ten beach houses just like this one, and maybe a woman like Skye to go with each of them. He had made it to this place by slapping the shit out of that little slab of vulcanized rubber, and on occasion he did the same to anyone who was foolhardy enough to try to whack that disk into his part of the world.

Skye looked up and noticed Hollis watching her. She waved and quickly lost interest in the birds, threw the remaining crumbs at the gulls, and left a feeding frenzy behind her as she ran toward the beach house. The moment she joined him on the sun deck her mouth found his.

"Thanks for the coffee," he said.

"Thanks for this," she added and kissed him again. They held each other in a silence that felt vaguely uncomfortable.

"Storm's coming in," he said to break the silence. "The gulls are flying inland for food. That's why there's so many of them."

"I suppose so," she remarked as if her thoughts had wandered to some other place.

Taking him by the hand she led him through the sliding doors without her eyes leaving his and sat beside him on the love seat by the large window that overlooked the dunes. "I have something I want to tell you," she announced, unable to restrain her smile.

Hollis leaned toward her and smiled back. "And what might

that be, pretty lady?" he asked, more amused than curious.

From the coffee table Skye picked up the puck that doubled as a paperweight, the same puck used in Hollis' first league game against the Rangers. The girl studied it, then looked at the wide-blade crisscrossing hockey sticks mounted on the far wall above the fireplace, the brickwork of which doubled as a shelf for his college trophies. The sticks were framed by two face masks and surrounded by assorted dry mounted newspaper clippings that covered what Hollis liked to call his Wall of Fame.

"Athletes and their trophies," she remarked, and now she sounded amused. "You can't tear them apart, can you?"

He looked at her hard, his smile beginning to twitch. The vague feeling of discomfort had returned. "I'm not following you, sweetheart."

The child that had possessed Skye on the beach vanished and in its place was something Hollis was not so sure he liked. He had never seen the girl turn serious quite this fast. She hesitated a moment before she spoke as if rehearsing the words she wanted to say next.

"I love you, Dack. I loved you even before we met. And although I've never heard you say it, I know that you love me too. And that's why I can tell you what I'm going to tell you because I know that you really do love me, and because my mind is made up about this." She said this slowly as if she were trying to convince Hollis — and perhaps herself — that her words were true.

"Just what are you say — ?" He stopped himself the moment their eyes locked. He knew.

The girl's eyes had revealed her secret even before she spoke the words. "I've known about it for a week, Dack. The baby is yours, and I'm going to keep it."

...And there it was, *rat-a-tat-a-tat-tat-tat!* Skye had spoken the words in plain rapid-fire English and aimed them directly at Dack Hollis' guts. He had not even had the time to absorb them before they tore into his stomach like dum-dum bullets.

"You're — You're sure?" he managed to get out. He heard the uneasiness in his voice and watched as his words melted the girl's smile even as he spoke. Hollis squeezed his knuckles tightly together until they whitened, fully aware that any solid object he would pick up might suddenly be sailing through the window. He felt the first angry bubbles of a boiling rage hit the surface, and be bit down hard on his knuckles before he spoke.

"...I mean, you're absolutely certain?"

It was not the reaction the girl had expected from him, and certainly not spoken in the tone of voice she wanted to hear. Hollis knew this. But his irritation would not permit even the semblance of reassurance, and mounting fury does not easily allow itself to be contained. From the start she had insisted he return the condoms to his drawer, and whether through innocence or sheer stupidity such blind faith in the sack was not uncommon among the women professional athletes invite to bed. Still, he had felt reasonably sure that Skye had not slept around like the others. But there were rules, and even star fuckers knew they were not supposed to say "I love you," and they were especially not supposed to get themselves knocked up.

Skye glared at him, her smile now completely gone.

"Say something, Dack."

"What am I supposed to say?"

"I love you too, might be nice," she suggested.

Hollis said nothing, expecting the volcanic eruption to occur with her next breath. And sure enough, it came.

"Then you can go to hell!" the girl shouted into his face. "I'm having this baby, Dack, and you can take this hockey puck and go fuck yourself with it!"

"Skye, listen..."

Whether her sudden reaction rightfully came from the child or the woman in Skye this was no time to get into a shouting match with the girl, and Hollis forced his anger back inside. He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away from him with a snap. When he reached again she raised the rubber puck over her head as if she had every intention of crushing his skull with it.

"Listen to me, will you?" he said, trying again to reach for her free hand. "We've spent a few weekends together and had a few laughs, but how much do we really — ?"

"Don't touch me!" she screamed, still holding the puck high. "Just don't — !"

Hollis grabbed the girl's wrists but she was struggling against him now, pounding her fists into his chest with surprising fury, and the puck fell into the space on the cushion between them. She broke free still pounding at him and he made another grab at her, but her pummeling fists seemed to be everywhere. He had to pin the girl down and climb on top of her, but even then she did not stop trying to slam her arms against him. She shrieked into his ears as she struggled against his weight on her, freeing one hand that suddenly became all fingers. Her long nails tore deep bloody streaks into his cheek and somehow the puck wound up in his hand. Hollis held it in front of the girl's face, and now he too was shouting.

"God damn it, Skye! Stop it! Stop it now! We can talk about this —"

"There's nothing to talk about, you bastard!" she shrieked at him, finding new strength to resume her scratching and clawing at his face. "I'm just another one of your fucking trophies, aren't I? Why don't you put my picture up there on your wall with the rest of your damned newspaper clippings, you lying son of a..."

Some primitive instinct suddenly kicked in, some hairy-man force that said to Hollis, *"Go ahead and do it! She deserves this!"*

...and so he slammed the puck directly into her jaw, feeling the bones in her face crunch and vibrate through his hand. The girl's eyes widened and he brought the puck down again in the same spot, this time shattering the broken bones into fragments and sending chips of her two front teeth rolling across the coffee table. When he slammed the rubber sphere into her temple Skye's mouth twisted in a grotesque misshapen mask that seemed devoid of expression. The girl's nostrils exploded in blood while her eyes flickered and rolled back doll-like into her head exposing only the whites, as if some wire inside her brain had short circuited.

Hollis' hands acted independently with the puck now, and he hit her again and again with the force of a raging machine gone out of control. His blows flattened the girl's delicate nose as easily as if he had been pummeling at wet sand instead of bone. The sharp proboscis bone inside her head punctured her brain like a meaty kabob, then splintered inside her skull. The girl's thin neck snapped backwards and even then Hollis did not stop pounding at her face until it had become an unrecognizable pulp that resembled a raw steak more than it did anything human.

Exhaustion finally overcame his rage. The girl's body slid

halfway to the floor with him still on top of her, and Hollis' hand thumped against the hard wood surface as if this were the only way he might release the dripping slab of hard rubber. His fingers finally relaxed and the puck slid from them, thick strands of cheese-like goo still connecting his hand to it.

Hollis got to his feet and stared at the girl whose limp corpse dangled over the love seat like a marionette whose strings were cut. He tried to summon a rational thought, something that would explain what had just happened and what he should do next. The puck was soaking in a puddle of dark blood, and he stared at the disk as if it contained an explanation.

"Jesus... Oh, sweet Jesus..." and somewhere inside a dark cavern of his brain a point score buzzer sounded.

Survival was what this was about! And that was what Hollis had to concentrate on now. Whatever happened next, it really was no different than protecting his team's net. Keep slamming at that puck double time until the fucker went away, right?

Well, isn't that right? the team manager who lived inside his brain asked of him. *Come on, son, you're on the clock....*

Yes... Yes...

That was the trick, then. A goal tender had to defend the crease to survive. Hollis walked through the sliding doors to the sun deck where less than fifteen minutes earlier he had watched the girl on the dunes, the wind tearing through her hair as she tossed crusts of bread to the hordes of sea gulls that had swooped down from nowhere, a hundred of them followed by more and more of the filthy bastards...

—*Hungry filthy bastards!* he thought, remembering how the girl had practically disappeared among the swarms of the swooping birds. He watched the sky where great purple clouds drifted over Rockport like blankets of dark wool. A storm was coming, just as he had told the girl. The gulls would be coming too, coming by the thousands seeking safe harbor on dry land. And deprived of their natural supply of sea food the birds would be hungry.

...Maybe they would be very hungry.

The beach was deserted this time of year except for the occasional fisherman or maybe an unshaven long-haired artist come to sketch some weather-beaten shanty near Halibut Point. From the road you could not see the waterfront behind the dunes, and with an approaching storm who in their right mind would be walking this far down the shoreline anyway?

His decision came fast. The gulls would have themselves an ornithological banquet, a goddamned meat and potatoes feast, and they would erase the damage he had done. Hollis suddenly felt himself back on the ice slamming that puck right off the planet. Dack Hollis, number 12, the promising rookie goal tender for the Quebec Keenies, was going to pull this one from the fire, sports fans. No penalties and no time-outs. The man was going to survive...

The simplicity surprised him. It was almost like preparing a simple meal, really. The girl's blood had smeared over much of her body, and once her clothes were off this made it easy for the bread crumbs to stick to her flesh. Hollis was not much of a cook, but he figured this was not very different from preparing a large breaded

meat loaf. Add a few cereal grains here and there to get the birds' attention, maybe a little Captain Crunch. Lightly sprinkle on some of those Quaker Oats as well. Like the old geezer on the T.V. commercial might say, *Tastes good, and it's good for ya*.

Maybe the tasty appetizer of food grains would persuade the gulls to stay for the meaty main course. Hell, weren't these scavengers used to going after their lunch while it was still swimming?

Hollis flipped on the trash compactor that contained the blood soaked sweats. He replaced the clothing with the flowery two piece swimsuit Skye had planned to wear for an afternoon dip and carried the girl's body over the dunes to the shoreline, placing it near the water's edge. Seating himself at the foot of a tall dune he waited, watching the sky.

The gulls came at once. The first was quickly followed by another, then two, then twenty. The early arrivals landed on the girl and waddled around on her stomach, but nothing more. Hollis bit his lip.

"Come on, boys," he whispered. "Eat hearty..."

One spunky little guy nibbled at some grains smeared above the girl's breast, apparently liked what was there and kept right on going. Another one who preferred to dine alone flew off with a fleshy chunk of her ear. Two large grey gulls tore at the meaty goblet inside the girl's mouth, yanked hard, then entered a tug-of-war over the rightful owner of her tongue. The birds' loud yammering brought on more of them, and the new arrivals swooped down from the sky ten or twenty at a time.

They shrieked, they screamed, they screeched...

...and they ate.

Hollis looked at the clouds and figured an hour tops before the rain would start. By then the gulls would have picked enough of her flesh clean. High tide would follow and the sea would take care of the rest. By then it would be dark. If she were found any time after that there would not be enough left of her for any kind of positive identification.

Of course, when Skye didn't show up at the modeling agency Monday morning there would be questions. Maybe he should wait a few hours, just long enough for the tide to come in. Then he would call the Rockport P.D. to report a terrible accident that had occurred when the couple had been caught by the storm while walking a little too close to the slippery rocky bluffs that overlooked the shoreline near the beach house.

I searched and searched for her, officer, even fall and scratched myself right here on my cheek. But — oh God! Why didn't I call you sooner? I just didn't know what I was doing...

Several birds had entered a scratch-and-peck dispute, and they hurled themselves at one another like feathered cannon balls.

"Take it easy, fellas," Hollis called to them. "There's enough for everybody!"

He walked back to the beach house while the gulls continued their meal to the accompaniment of the deep grumbles of thunder.

The storm had grown worse, and it showed no signs of letting up even after several hours. The surf had become rough also, and with high tide Hollis knew the waves had carried the girl's remains out to sea. He had spent the remaining hours of the afternoon

cleaning and scouring the freckles of blood that seemed everywhere. A particularly nasty smear had sopped into a cushion on the love seat, and Hollis had to settle for simply turning the damned thing over on its other side. By dark he felt satisfied that everything looked as it had.

In a moment he would call the police, but first he looked through the sliding doors at the dunes to see if any of the gulls remained. Before the police arrived he would double check to make sure that the Atlantic had taken what the gulls had left behind. From the house it was difficult to see through the sheets of rain, and only the brief flashes of lightning provided any kind of view. But the sea gulls seemed to have gone, and this was a sure sign that the girl had too.

Hollis picked up the phone receiver and heard nothing. The storm must have knocked down the lines, he figured. But he had the cellular in his car, so he could make his call from the BMW.

Maybe a drink would help him pull this thing off, a brief visit with Mr. Jack Daniels to steady his nerves. Just one, though. He could not appear too relaxed.

He was in the middle of pouring his drink when the lights flickered. They blinked three or four times and went out. For a moment Hollis stood motionless in the darkness trying to believe there was some kind of mistake. This was one hell of a time for a lesson in Murphy's Law.

Downing the drink in one motion, he tumbled toward the fireplace and pulled a wooden match from its box on the shelf, lit it, shoved the box into his pocket, then inched toward the sliding door in the winking match light. There was a flashlight in his car, and he figured he should make that call before too much time elapsed and he aroused any suspicion. He stepped outside to the deck.

The rain immediately huffed his face, thoroughly soaking him before he even reached the stairway, and he slipped on the slick boards of the sun deck at the top of the steps. Grabbing the railing at the last moment he slid backwards. His ankle snapped like a dried branch, and a thousand needles shot up his leg as the tarsus bone tore through the flesh of his foot. Rolling over on his back, Hollis screamed.

...and just as quickly he stopped.

An odd snapping sound came from just above him. Hollis hit hard on his lip to drive back the pain and listened. He heard it again coming from just over his head. Now there were several shudders at once, quick sharp whipping sounds like those made by leather straps.

Hollis looked at the roof and saw the small shadowy lumps silhouetted in darkness against the stormy sky. Illuminated by thick smears of lightning they perched along the shingles and eaves, fluttering in the rain as they leaned forward, some cocking their heads to study him. Despite the storm, the blood of their recent meal had clung to some of the their breast feathers like tar, and many of their smeared heads were open.

The gulls had tasted flesh. They had liked it, and now they wanted more.

"Eat shit!" Hollis called out to them. He gritted his teeth and dragged himself on his knees across the sun deck back to the sliding doors.

He made it inside, and not a single bird had moved as he slid the door shut behind him. Although the darkness would not permit

him to see a thing, he could wait the bastards out until morning. Hell, a hum ankle and the downed phone lines might even make his story more convincing. He hauled himself further inside toward the love seat and pulled himself from the floor to relieve the pressure on his foot. As he fell back into the soft cushion his arm dangled over the side.

His hand struck something soft and wet. And suddenly Hollis screamed again at the sharp pain that shot through his wrist as if he had been pinched by a small pair of garden shears. He pulled his hand free and could feel warm blood trickle to his elbow.

One bird had somehow gotten in, but another flutter from across the room suggested that there was a second gull inside. Hollis heard a click-click-click on the floor that sounded like maybe one of them might be walking along the hard wood. He pulled the damp matchbox from his pocket and flicked a wooden match against the side. Nothing happened. He tried again and this time it took.

In the flickering light Hollis saw that he was wrong. He was very wrong.

There were at least a dozen gulls in the room and they were still coming in, and now the fluttering that had grown much louder was coming from the fireplace.

...the fireplace!

The gulls were coming into the house in piles, and their wings snapped as they perched themselves on the ceiling fan, hookcase, and shelves. The match singed his fingers and the moment he shook it out a damp wing flapped against his face as one flew past him in the darkness.

In the brief winks of lightning he saw them all around him as they yammered to each other in the white light. The fuckers were everywhere, and he was in no condition to outrun them. But if he could make it to the far wall he knew a way to bring down enough of them to even the odds.

A slow and smooth trek to the other side of the room was no easy matter for a man who wore his ankle bone on the outside, and Hollis could move only with brief hops that barely suggested motion. But the darkness was on his side now, and although he could hear them fluttering restlessly no bird disturbed him. He reached the wall and stretched on his good leg. He pulled one dry mounted news clipping from the wall, set a match to it, and tossed it into the fireplace.

"We're into a sudden-death overtime now, you filthy bastards!" he shouted as he slid on the mask and pulled the long curved stick from the wall. Grasping it with both hands he turned toward the gulls that had alighted around him and felt a smile smear across his face. "You're on my ice now, fuckers! Let's play us some hockey!"

A slow fat gull hurtled itself at him and Hollis hit it dead center. The bird burst like a blood-filled balloon as he smashed it across the room, leaving behind several long white pin feathers that dove-tailed to the floor.

Two came at his face mask from opposite corners, and he picked each off with a fore-swing and a back-swing. One splattered against the wall, the other thumped blindly around on the floor with one torn wing hanging loosely at its side.

"Let's go, boys! Rock and Roll!" shouted Hollis.

This brought on more of them from above and below, and Hollis swung at them wildly now, laughing and screaming as he

hopped on his good foot to reposition himself for the next round of takers. A few managed to break through and slice some skin along his legs and forearms, but once Hollis shook them off his stick found them.

Dead and dying birds lay in bloody balls surrounding him, some at his feet, others clear across the room on the coffee table and furniture. Many others remained roosted where they were. Hollis looked at them and removed his mask. His face dripped with sweat and his breaths came in fast gulps.

The fire flickered out and Hollis slumped to his knees in the darkness. The pain in his ankle was now singing an Italian opera but still Hollis laughed.

"You guys are either very smart or complete chicken-shits," he said to the remaining gulls that perched in the darkness like stone statues. He could only crawl to the sliding door, but perhaps he could make it down the deck stairway to his car. He got to his knees and slid the door open.

"Game's over, guys, and I'm outa here," he said to the remaining gulls inside. "Sorry, but it doesn't look like you boys will be having that second course tonight."

An icy hand touched his shoulder.

"You're right, Dack," a voice said to him in the darkness of the rain spattered sun deck. Hollis turned and looked up at the dark figure who stood behind him. In the brief flickers of lightning he saw the girl in the blood-soaked two-piece who wore the flesh of Skye Tyler in meaty tatters.

"Not exactly the way I'd imagine you'd picture one of your adoring fans, am I, Dack?" Slipping bony fingers around his neck, she smiled with teeth that were no longer framed with lips. "Maybe just a little kiss first, before we eat?"

He pushed her away, a tidal wave of nausea stirring deep inside, and he tried to say something, anything, afraid he might woof right through his teeth before the words came.

"Jesus, Skye... I didn't mean it! I swear to God, I didn't mean —"

The woman said nothing, only held out her arms while two sea gulls alighted on them like trained show birds.

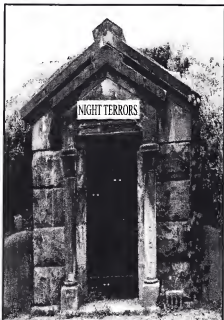
"Are you hungry, darling? I know I am." She turned to each gull. "Are you guys hungry too? I'll bet you are!"

Dack barely had time to scream before the first gull tore out his tongue. In a flash fire of agony he watched the second fly off with a bleeding object he realized was one of his eyes.

Despite the thunder he heard the flapping of the approaching gulls. Hundreds of them.

Unable to see Skye clearly through the bleeding curtain of his remaining eye he felt the woman's teeth sink deep into his neck. She fell on him just as a soaking wet gull tore into his face. In a sudden wash of lightning he saw Skye smiling.

"Join us for dinner, Dack?" **NT**



NIGHT TERRORS will keep an eye out for you

Marion Deeds was born in Santa Barbara, California, but she has lived in Northern California since the age of five. She has been writing since she was six. Her stories deal with the place where the rational world ends and the unknown begins. Her short works have appeared in *HURRICANE ALICE*, *ABERRATIONS*, *GOODWITCH STORIES*, and in the cross-genre anthology *THE MAGIC WITHIN*. In addition to writing short stories, Marion is also writing a novel about the forces that feed on the hidden places in the human soul. When she is not writing she works as a staff trainer for a large local government agency.

MADONNA OF THE MASK

by

MARION DEEDS

Doreen reached out to touch the hat dancer robe, sure for a minute that it was made of human skin. It wasn't. The red, yellow and black robe felt like heavy paper, and tiny carved bats' heads marched across the squared arms and lined the vertical opening. Doreen knew suddenly that things would change. She *felt* it; a swelling warmth in her womb.

Mrs. Kramer slid a dowl through the sleeves. "It's a beauty, isn't it?" she said. She stood up. The greenhouse windows let southern light into the studio, and it accentuated the sagging skin under Mrs. Kramer's chin. Sometimes Doreen saw wrinkles at the corner of her eyes too, but not very often.

Mrs. Kramer carried the robe over to the alcove by the door and hung it up.

"What's it for?" Doreen asked.

"Fertility ceremonies." She laughed. "With my luck I should probably hang it upside down." She stepped away from the robe and sunlight flared off her heavy silver squash blossom necklace.

Doreen felt her heart pounding as she said, "I'll get the mask."

"Would you, dear? Thanks." Mrs. Kramer was tweaking and plucking at the robe, trying to get it to hang a certain way. Doreen felt as if it were her own skin being pinched, and turned away quickly.

The stylized bat's head rested cradled against her belly. Fangs were prominent in the protruding snout; and slanted eyes glared up knowingly at her. The breath went out of her in a deep slow sigh, and brought with it the thought, *you'll help me get a baby*. Stroking the high, domed top of the mask reverently, she carried it to Mrs. Kramer.

Mrs. Kramer positioned the mask and stepped back. "There. How's that?"

The eye on Doreen's side of the mask watched her, knowing and promising. The memory of the wood clung to Doreen's fingers and the skin of her abdomen. Yellow, red and black. "It's good," she said.

"Lunch is ready?"

"Yes," Doreen said.

Mrs. Kramer walked briskly down the Spanish tile hallway to the kitchen. Doreen stayed where she was, looking at the mask.

"We've got blackcherries encroaching on the hackyard," Mrs.

Kramer said, as Doreen loaded the dinner dishes into the dishwasher. "Remind me to call the Linhs when I get back."

"I will," Doreen said.

"And I've changed the alarm. You have the new numbers, right?"

Doreen nodded.

"The phone numbers are over the phone, and the cash and the checkbook are in the drawer. And scrub down the back bathroom, because I'm having it repainted."

Doreen nodded again.

"You'll clean the drapes and the carpets?"

"I will."

"You're a gem."

When Doreen was finished with her kitchen chores she went to her room, across the hall from the studio. It was tiny but all hers, unlike the long narrow room she had shared with her five sisters. There was a mirror on the back of the door, and a frail stick like figure stared back at her from it. The stick had mouse colored hair, gray skin, gray eyes. Skinny, skin stretched over knobby bones — too skinny to hold the magic of a baby inside. But maybe the Virgin Mary had looked this way, before she was filled with the magical tide of fire. Maybe now she would be able to feel a baby growing in her belly; to be magical, special, real.

She waited until she thought Mrs. Kramer was asleep, then opened her door and walked across the hall. The studio was never locked when Mrs. Kramer was home. Doreen went in and knelt in front of the robe. The mask stared down at her. There was no light in the room, but Doreen could see it clearly. *What do I do?* she asked it.

Doreen had tried to get a baby since high school. For a while she had driven out to the truck stop on the interstate, climbing into the cab of any trucker who called her, sure she would get a baby there. She hadn't. Now she went to Tootie's road house whenever she could, but there was still no baby.

She rested her head against the stiff fabric of the robe. No answers came to her. She would just have to be patient.

Finally she stood up and turned away. Her hand was on the doorknob when she heard the voice, just below her left ear, clearly spoken, clearly silent.

There is a price.

Her heart lifted.

She got up early to fix Mrs. Kramer breakfast, helped her carry her bags to the car, and waved good-bye from the driveway. The front lawn needed trimming. Beyond the hedge, a battered rust-colored van went by. It did not look like it belonged in the neighborhood.

She started her chores. By three o'clock her body ached pleasantly from the exertion. She ate a peanut butter sandwich standing over the sink, then went into the studio.

The mask didn't look right, alone and forgotten in the alcove. She rummaged through the storage bins until she found two shallow Pomo baskets, and placed one on each side of the robe. That felt better somehow. She sat down cross-legged in front of it, waiting for it to speak. Eventually her eyes began to sting, making her blink. The robe and mask moved, shrinking and swelling in time with her breathing. Her stomach gurgled. The mask was silent.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked it.

The doorbell sounded.

She jumped. She swallowed and got to her feet. The bell rang again.

Through the living room window she could see the old rusted van.

A long haired man stood on the front step. He looked right at the peephole, as if he could see her, and grinned. She pressed the intercom button.

"Who is it?"

"I'm looking for yard work."

Doreen hesitated. People did not go door to door looking for work around here. She looked at him again. He had a straight narrow nose, high cheekbones, and deeply tanned skin. He could have been one of the Indians who had carved the bat-dancer mask.

He said, "Isn't this Mrs. Kramer's place? The landscaper, Mr. Linh, said she might have work. I have references."

"Mrs. Kramer isn't available right now," Doreen said.

"Who are you? Her daughter?"

"The housekeeper."

"Well, is there something I can do? Lawn looks a little scraggly, around the edges."

She shut her eyes. She felt empty, hollow; a bag of skin, shrinking and swelling like the mask and robe. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Essai."

It went into and out of her like a breath.

She turned off the alarm and opened the door. "You can edge and mow the lawn. How much do you charge?"

"Five dollars an hour." His teeth were very white. And the mask had promised her help.

"Okay," she said. "Wait here."

She got the keys to the tool shed. Essai was standing with his back to the door. His hands rested on his hips, and smooth ovals of muscle in his back bugged against his black t-shirt. He turned his head as she came out, pulling the door shut behind her. "I'll show you where the equipment is," she said.

"Hey, great! Mrs. Kramer said okay, huh?" He wanted her to touch him, Doreen knew, feel the warmth of him seeping into her palm, and he wanted her to look up at him, into those eyes. That

smile. But she wasn't ready yet. She started across the cobblestones. She could sense his presence, his maleness, feel it the way she could see things out of the corner of her eye sometimes. They opened the shed and rolled out the lawnmower.

"Knock on the front door when you get done," she said, and walked back to the house.

"Thanks!" he called after her.

She locked the front door and went into the kitchen. The refrigerator was filled with pasta, chicken breasts, fish fillets. White food, food for women. Men liked meat. She took ten dollars out of the house cash and put it in her apron pocket. The rackety buzz of the lawnmower drifted into the kitchen.

Essai rang the doorbell at five thirty. He had taken off his shirt. His hair was flattened against the top of his head, and the sharp smell of his sweat made her mouth fill with saliva. "I'm filthy," he said. "You got a garden hose I can rinse off with?"

"You can use the back bathroom," she said.

"Oh, hey, no, I'm a mess..."

She stepped back and motioned him in.

He followed her to the bathroom at the very end of the hall. While he cleaned up, she went back into the kitchen and poured him a glass of iced tea. She took out chopped onions and herbs, grated some cheese, and broke three eggs into a blue pottery bowl.

He came back and stood next to her. "Is that for me? You're a sweetie." He took the tea glass and sat at the counter.

Doreen poured the egg mixture into a hot frying pan. Whisking with one hand, she added the herbs and cheese with the other. She could hear the clink of ice cubes, hear him swallow. Hear him breathe. The eggs were fluffy, and she turned off the heat.

"Mrs Kramer's not home, is she?" he asked. He smiled at her, as he reached for the plate. His forearms were covered with fine dark hair, sable wires. His fingers touched hers. *Essai*, she thought, saying it to herself with her breath. Her chest filled, and the bowl between her hips lifted, swelled with a tingling, tickling sensation that was almost like pain.

"Want some toast?" she asked him.

"Is this all for me? Aren't you eating?"

"Not hungry."

He concentrated on his food and she watched him eat. The muscle in the hinge of his jaw bunched and loosened with each bite. She studied the curve where neck joined shoulder, admiring the hollows on either side of his collarbone.

"God, that's good," he said, pushing away the plate.

She reached for it. The ten dollar bill rustled in her pocket as she moved. "Here's your money," she said, taking it out.

"Thanks. Any chance of finding some more work for me tomorrow? I'm flat broke."

Doreen carried the plate to the gleaming red counter.

"I mean it; I've got no money and that van is a gas guzzler. Is there some other yard work? Gutters need cleaning?"

She thought about the blackberries. "Come back tomorrow," she said.

"All right!"

She watched him walk away. Worn denim rubbed and

whispered against the backs of his long thighs. She shut the door, locked it, and activated the alarm.

After she rinsed the dishes she went back into the studio to take down the curtains. Halfway through, one of the N-shaped pins stuck in the fabric. She tugged on it, and it pulled free, its sharp end scoring the soft flesh of her wrist. It stung. Tiny pinheads of blood appeared on her arm. She licked them off experimentally. More blood seeped up into the scratch.

The room trembled slightly around her. She put her thumb against her wrist below the scratch and pressed. Blood welled up. She wiped it off with her index finger and studied the crimson smear. After a moment she looked up at the mask, and rubbed the blood into one of its wooden teeth. The blood disappeared against the black lacquer, and the mask seemed to smile.

She lay in bed and listened to the house settle around her. The heels of her hands were pressed lightly against her hip bones, and her fingers rested, not quite touching, on the downy skin just above the line of pubic hair. *My ovaries are just below my fingers*, she thought, *egg machines*. She cupped her fingers somewhat, felt the skin move with each inhalation and exhalation. Nestled below the protective pipes of her intestines was her womb, warm and soft as a velvet lined pouch, waiting for the magic to fill it. Blood-lined. She thought of the heads of blood on her wrist. Deep in the inner darkness of her eyes a picture appeared; a wedged streak of brown and black glass, rough edged. Doreen did not recognize it. Before she could recapture the image it was gone.

Essai rang the doorbell at eight o'clock. He drank a cup of coffee and ate two cinnamon rolls.

"There are some blackberries to chop down," she said.

"Point me to them."

She showed him what Mrs. Kramer wanted done. The house was U shaped, and Mrs. Kramer's wing opened out onto a brick patio. The blackberries were growing down over the retaining wall and choking out the annuals Mrs. Kramer had planted there. Doreen went back inside. She ironed the studio curtains, pleating them carefully, and thought about Essai's back and hips as he bent over the stubborn vines.

He came in once to use the bathroom. At eleven thirty she went into the kitchen and made him a ham and cheese sandwich, and carried it out on a tray with two glasses of tea. He picked up the glass and drained it in one long drink, head tipped back, throat rolling with each swallow.

"Want some more?"

"In a minute," he said. He sat down next to her. "Don't you ever eat? You don't eat enough to keep a bird alive."

"Birds eat a lot," Doreen said. Her mother had said things like that. Her favorite thing to say had been, "What's that next to Allison? A shadow? Oh, no, it's Doreen!"

He picked up one half of the sandwich. "You like hanging around this place by yourself? I'd get lonely."

"I'm not usually by myself."

"Where are Mrs. Kramer's kids? Do they come around a lot?"

"Her daughter lives in Alaska. They talk on the phone a lot."

"Any other kids?"

Doreen shrugged. She wasn't very interested in Mrs. Kramer's

family.

It was hot on the patio. The edges of Doreen's vision were sparkly, and things blurred if she moved her head quickly. She picked up her glass. His thigh was very close to hers, nearly touching, and heat radiated off him.

"I could live like this," Essai said, looking at the house.

"It's a nice place to work," Doreen said, because he seemed to expect something.

"Pay must be pretty good too, for all the work you do. Cooking, all the cleaning, all the stuff she doesn't want to be bothered with."

Doreen shrugged.

"How'd you get the job? I don't know anybody who has a live in housekeeper."

"Mrs. Kramer knows my mother. They went to college together or something." She had never figured how Mrs. Kramer could like someone like her mother.

"Well, I bet she's glad. She's got a good deal. You make a lot? I mean, would I want to be a handyman here, or something?"

"A hundred a week."

"Are you kidding?"

She shook her head.

"For all the work you do? She's taking advantage of you."

She shook her head again. She didn't care about money; that wasn't important. She didn't want to have to think about how to live. She wanted to concentrate on making her body ready for a baby. But he wouldn't understand that.

"Well, as long as you're happy."

She stood up and he did too. He was closer than he'd ever been. She didn't have to look up too far. He was smiling. She thought he was going to kiss her, but he just smiled. "I'm going to weed out that bed along the edge of the patio," he said. "It's really overgrown."

"Okay."

Even though she had no reason to, after she had put away the lunch things she went into the studio to look at the mask.

The baskets were not enough. The place in front of the robe didn't look enough like a special place. It had to look like the niche where the statue of the Virgin lived at church. The Virgin was special. Tadpole and egg had joined in her, filling her with the magical tide of fire. She was much more important than just some ordinary married woman with a bunch of kids.

Mrs. Kramer had three little handwoven rugs in the storage bin. Doreen unrolled a red one with black and brown diamonds on it, and set it aside. There was a funny-shaped newspaper wrapped package next to the rugs. It reminded Doreen of something. She picked it up. Through the newspaper she could feel sharp edges. She unwrapped the paper carefully. The last piece fell away from a ten inch wedge of obsidian — black and brown, like a glass knife. It felt right. She carried the rug over and spread it out carefully in front of the robe, then lay down the knife between the two baskets. That seemed better.

She sat down on the rug. The mask looked no different from yesterday; no mark to show where the blood had been. She looked down at her wrist. The scratch was a faint stitching of white on grayish skin. Not enough. She picked up the knife in her left hand and squeezed it. The glass grew warm in her grip and she squeezed harder until she felt something give. She opened her hand. Two

lines of blood ran across her palm. She waited until the red pooled in the creases of her palm, then carefully rubbed the tip of the blade in it. Blood headed up on the obsidian like water on a window. She stood, keeping her hand palm up to avoid dripping on the rug, and rubbed the tip of the knife across the wooden teeth. Her hand was beginning to hurt, but she didn't care.

Sometimes sacrifices had to be made.



"Do you like steak?" she called out the back door. Essai was kneeling at the edge of the bricks, clipping the grass that had grown over them. Sweat sheened his back. He looked up, flipping hair out of his face. "Sure," he said.

"If I give you some money, will you go to the store?"

He stood up and rubbed his hands on his jeans. "Okay." He walked over to her. She handed him the bills.

"What happened?" He took her hand in warm fingers and bent her own open gently, feeling the cuts sting. "You hurt yourself."

"I picked up something sharp."

"What, a machete? You should be more careful." The skin between his brown eyebrows wrinkled. "She shouldn't have dangerous stuff lying around. It should be in a safe or something."

She shook her head and pulled her hand away slowly.

He wasn't gone very long. He came back with two steaks and a six pack of beer in bottles. They ate in the back yard, looking at all the work he'd done. Doreen sat on one of the redwood planters. The sun was just starting to set. By the time it had disappeared, he was sitting on the ground beside her, resting his head lightly against her thigh. She stroked his hair.

"You're alone too much," he said. "And all you do is work. I worry about you."

"I'm not alone now."

He laughed. "When is Mrs. Kramer coming back?"

"Tomorrow."

"Good. Then you won't be here all by yourself." He caught her hand and held it against his mouth, kissing her palm. The heat from his breath rolled through her body. She set her plate down on the bricks.

He kissed the hollow of her elbow, and pulled her down off the planter next to him. He was warmer than she was. His fingers slid through her hair, brushing lightly along the sides of her neck, and she moaned softly. Her heart beat faster. She pulled him around to face her and kissed him. He tasted of beer. His weight settled against her, as solid and comforting as warm stone.

"Where's your room?" he whispered. She got to her feet and pulled him up. He came up with his arms around her, nuzzling her neck. She closed her eyes and saw the mask grinning.

He was brown all over, and his skin was smooth. He wanted to do all kinds of fancy things, and Doreen let him, but her mind was on the mask. And a baby. Her body felt heavy, full of blood, and her belly and inner thighs were so sensitive to his touch that she could barely stand it. She bent her knees and spread her legs farther apart. They looked like the edges of a huge shallow bowl. He was kissing her, her navel, the delicate hand of skin below her navel, his hands caressing her thighs. She wound her fingers in his hair and pulled. "Inside me," she said.

He moved right away, breath hot in her face. "All right," he

said. She guided him, moved her hips and felt him slide inside. He groaned. His hips moved, almost convulsively. An offertory bowl, she thought. This was how you get a baby.

"Magic," she whispered.

"Huh?" It turned into another groan and she clutched him to her. He relaxed suddenly, gasping, and started to roll away.

"No," she said, holding him.

He braced himself on his arms and kissed her, lightly, playfully. "God, that was great," he said. "Babe, I've got to move."

She let go of him. He rolled free and flopped down on his back with a sigh. Doreen pressed her thighs tightly together and waited for the joining. All she felt was a faint soreness.

The bed squeaked as he got up. She heard him go into the bathroom.

She closed her eyes. *Again*, she thought. *Just to be sure.*

He came back and lay down beside her. "What are you thinking?" His hand rubbed her lower belly gently. Maybe he did understand, after all.

"We should do it again," she said.

He laughed. "Damn straight, but give me a couple minutes, okay?" He kissed her shoulder. "I'm surprised Mrs. Kramer lets you have people in here, with all that valuable stuff you were talking about, from the gallery."

She was trying to concentrate on her body, and he was irritating her, but she didn't say anything. She didn't remember talking about the gallery.

"I mean, she doesn't even keep it in a safe, right? Just out where anyone could get it."

"The studio's locked," Doreen said. She could feel nothing beyond fatigue and the liquid fullness, now beginning to fade.

"And she's got you here. You must like her a lot, to help her out with so much."

This distracted Doreen. She really had not ever thought about liking Mrs. Kramer. Mrs. Kramer had hired her to help out Doreen's mother. She certainly didn't care very much about Doreen. She shook her head, and let her good hand slide down Essai's chest. He lay back and she rolled over on top of him. His eyes were half closed.

"Where'd you learn this stuff?" he asked, but she was too busy to answer.

She let him out a little bit after three. She lay awake a while longer, hoping to feel the magic instant when tadpole and egg joined, but, waiting, she fell asleep.

When she woke up the room was too light, and she was sticky and hot. She took a shower and went out to make coffee. The van was parked out front. After she got the coffee made she walked out to it. Essai was asleep in the front.

"There isn't any more work," she said.

"Well, can I come back when Mrs. Kramer gets home? Maybe she can recommend me to someone." He stroked her cheek. "I'd like to stay in the neighborhood."

Doreen thought she would like to have him in the neighborhood too, just in case. "Okay," she said.

After she finished the morning chores, she sat cross legged in front of the mask, praying to be allowed to feel the joining. The mask frowned down at her. She began to worry. She wasn't going to get a baby this time. She hadn't given enough. She picked up the knife again, and rolled her shirt up over her abdomen, prepared to

cut deeper, give it more blood.

The garage door began its noisy ascent.

Mrs. Kramer was home.

Doreen met her in the garage and helped her carry in her bags.

She talked a lot, and Doreen listened as best she could.

"Who did the backyard?" Mrs. Kramer asked, as Doreen was hanging up clothes in the closet.

"A man. He'll be back. He wants more work."

"You hired him? Where did you find him?"

"He came to the door. Mr. Linh sent him."

Mrs. Kramer looked at her for a long time. "He just came to the door?"

"He travels around a lot. Mr. Linh sent him."

Mrs. Kramer sighed. "Well, okay...did we pay him?"

"I paid him out of the house money."

"Well, he did good work. He can paint that bathroom, if he's so inclined. That'll save me a few bucks."

Doreen nodded and went up front to defrost some turkey breasts for dinner. She was mixing the vinaigrette salad dressing when she heard Mrs. Kramer call her.

Mrs. Kramer was in the studio, looking at the mask, with its rug and baskets. "Who did this?"

Doreen's heart began to beat painfully. "I did."

Mrs. Kramer looked at her. It was a look Doreen's mother used sometimes. "This looks like a shrine."

Doreen didn't answer.

"These aren't toys, Doreen."

"I know."

"They are works of art."

"I know."

"Did you clean the drapes?"

"Yes."

"And the carpets?"

"Yes."

"All of them?"

Doreen realized that Mrs. Kramer wanted to find something she hadn't done, so that she could be more angry about the mask. She nodded.

"Well. Good. I trusted you in here because I *thought* you could appreciate the importance of these pieces. Do you understand?"

Doreen's chest began to hurt. Mrs. Kramer could keep her away from the mask. She nodded again.

"Don't play in here any more," Mrs. Kramer said.

"I won't."

"Put these things away."

Doreen rolled up the rug carefully and carried it over to the bin. She felt water rolling down her cheeks. What if Mrs. Kramer sent Essai away? She took a deep breath and it came out in a sob. She put the baskets away too. The knife she saved for last. Instead of putting it in the bin she carried it into her room and slipped it under her pillow. The mask would understand. She would still do what she needed to do. Sacrifices would still be made.

Essai came by after dinner. He had taken a shower somewhere, and wore a faded gray shirt instead of a T shirt. Mrs. Kramer talked to him in the kitchen, while Doreen loaded the dishwasher.

"You did a good job in the back yard," Mrs. Kramer said.

"Thanks, ma'am. I work hard."

"Doreen says we're paying you five dollars an hour."

He nodded. He looked like a little boy cleaned up for church, and there was something familiar about the shirt. It looked like a uniform. Doreen rinsed the plates with water as hot as her hands could stand.

"Doreen said Mr. Linh gave you my name. How do you know him?"

"I don't, exactly, ma'am. I stopped by to see if he was hiring. He was going away for a few days. He gave me the names of families he knew wanted work done. I just started going down the list."

"I see."

Doreen carefully lined the forks and knives up in their dishwasher holders. Her heart was pounding hard enough to hurt. Mrs. Kramer wasn't going to let him stay.

"Do you have any references?"

"Yes, ma'am." He reached into his pocket. "I worked for Mr. Hoaglin in Platero. He'd give you a reference."

"Chip Hoaglin? Aristos Gallery? I know Chip. You wait here; I'll go give him a call."

Doreen didn't look at Essai as she wiped down the counter for the third time. When Mrs. Kramer came back, she was smiling. "Chip remembers you very well," she said. "He says you were a hard worker and very polite."

"He was a nice guy," Essai said. He pushed a tattered piece of paper towards her. "Here are the names of some other people I've worked for."

Mrs. Kramer tapped her fingers on the paper and looked at him. "Essai. Well...Essai, why don't you come back tomorrow around eight, and we'll see what we have for you to do."

Essai smiled, the big white smile he had tried on Doreen the first day. Doreen's cheeks hurt and she knew she was smiling too.

"Thank you very much, ma'am," he said.

Doreen let him out. He looked back toward the kitchen, then stooped and kissed her quickly. "Let me in tonight," he whispered. She didn't answer.

"Say you will. I want to see you."

She shut the door.

Mrs. Kramer was looking at the piece of paper. Doreen knew she wasn't going to call anyone else.

"Chip says he's not too bright but he works hard."

Doreen nodded.

"What do you know about him, Doreen?"

She tried to remember what he had said about himself the night before. "He's from Southern California. It was too confining, he said, so he took off. He travels, works enough to keep gas in the van, and moves on. He likes historical things."

Mrs. Kramer laughed. "I bet. Well, I'll get my money's worth, anyway."

"Yes," Doreen said.

Mrs. Kramer stood up and stretched. "Bring a pitcher of iced tea down to my room, will you? I'm stiff. I want to soak in a warm tub for while."

"I will."

Doreen poured tea over the ice cubes. It could take the tadpoles twenty-four hours to swim up and meet the egg, but she didn't even hope. The mask needed more from her, a real sacrifice. Something important.

Mrs. Kramer took the glass from her hand without looking up.

The tub was filled with bubbles, and only her head, supported by a pink plastic bath pillow, was visible. "Thanks, hon," she said. "Just set the pitcher on the floor."

Doreen looked at the line where the bubbles separated Mrs. Kramer's head from her body, and thought about the two clean lines on her palm.

"Good night, Mrs. Kramer."

She went out to the kitchen and sat by the window, sure that Essai would come.

When she saw the lights of the van through the window she turned off the alarm and stepped outside into the cool night air. She ran to the hedge. He was easing the van door closed. "Come around to the back," she whispered. "She won't hear us."

He pulled her against him and nipped at her earlobe. "Good girl," he said.

She took him into her room. He was different, rougher, and he didn't want to do the fancy things tonight, but that was fine. The more of him inside her, the better, she thought as Essai thrust and panted between the shallow dish of her thighs. She began to worry. She should really make the sacrifice first, but she couldn't. Would the mask understand?

He moved away from her. "Aren't you scared she'll hear us?"

"She's on the other side of the house."

"She isn't very nice, after all, Doreen."

She was concentrating, trying to feel the magical tide of fire sweeping up into her, to merge, to join with the egg. Please, she thought, even though she knew it couldn't happen yet. She realized that Essai had asked her a question about the alarms.

"Just the one on the outside doors," she said.

"She's not very careful. It's like she wants to get robbed."

She didn't answer.

He began to knead her breasts. She tipped her head back for his kisses, and he started again. Satin soft skin, hard muscles, hard calloused flesh on parts of his hands, his heels, the velvet flow of soft skin over neck and shoulders, warm hands, the slide of wet flesh against wet flesh.

Something woke her, something wrong. She lay in the darkness and tried to sense what was different. Essai was gone. She started to relax, then realized there was light streaking in under the door.

She got up. The studio light was on.

Essai was bent double over one of the bins. He was dressed, and had a canvas satchel with him. She hadn't noticed it before. He straightened up sharply when he heard the door whisper across the carpet, then smiled when he saw her, a big playful smile. "Shhh," he said, finger to his lips. "Just some party favors, babe. Don't say anything, okay?"

"Why are you stealing from Mrs. Kramer?"

"Hey, she'll never miss it. It's not fair she has all this stuff and people like us don't."

She pressed her thighs together to keep as much of him inside her as she could. She hoped he wouldn't take the mask.

"I'm just taking a few tiny things, things she probably stole from some Indian tribe or something. Just go back to bed. I'll come in and kiss you good night, okay?"

"Doreen?" Mrs. Kramer brushed past her and came into the room before she could answer him. She was wearing a white terry cloth robe and fuzzy white slippers.

"Doreen, call the police," Mrs. Kramer said. To Essai she said, "Put that down right now, and get the bell out."

He smiled again, but the smile didn't look right. "I'm so glad you showed up! Billy says hi, Mrs. Kramer. I promised your boy I'd look you up especially."

"As far as I'm concerned I don't have a son."

"That's what he said you'd say."

Mrs. Kramer made a funny move with her head, as if she were dodging a mosquito, and said, "Doreen, go call the police."

"Bet she won't," Essai said. "She likes me better than she likes you. Don't you Doreen?"

Mrs. Kramer half turned suddenly to look at Doreen.

"I'm really important to her. Aren't I, Doreen?"

"It's true," Doreen said. "He is."

"Just go back to bed, okay? I want to fill Mr. Kramer in on how her baby boy is doing. We met in Santa Medina Correctional. He told me all about you."

"I should have known," Mrs. Kramer said.

Doreen backed out of the room and pulled the door nearly shut. She realized she didn't have any clothes on, so she tugged on the raggedy old green robe her mother had made for her years ago.

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HILDRED'S TALE

by

D. F. LEWIS

Hildred's eyes were the worst set of eyes with which I've seen anyone looking. When I first met him, it was upon the occasion of a school match. Boys (players and spectators alike) were transported in bulk by a convoy of minivans with the teachers as drivers — to a school across the other side of the city for a needle match between our respective rugby teams. I was a second-row forward with a hankering towards a position more suitable for my sprinter's frame — such as wing three-quarter. But most of that is misguided history, as useless as old bones in new dogs.

Yet, Hildred does not stay as mere history. He haunts me far into the future, too. He was one of the masters at the opposing school, the rugby teacher, in fact, whom all his boys either called Sir or Mr. Hildred, their respect seeming to border on fear. Behind his back, I'm sure one of the pupils referred to him as something quite different, a nickname not dissimilar to Bulth or Wulth or something.

The actual day started cold and blustery: a day where either scarves were flags or necks stiff — as Brian (my best friend) always said. Eventually, after many attempts at favouritism and confusion, we were hustled aboard and driven through our school's gates, cheering loudly — thinking, in our boyish way, that this was the most important event in the whole wide world. Selfishness slouches hand in hand with shame — except, of course, when you're young. Then, all's self and nothing's everything else.

That day, we shouted out crass racist comments, as we trundled through the grey-streaked streets of the inner city. We howled in self-intoxication — until the teacher at the front told us to quieten down and save our energy for the playing-field: that area between the huge H-posts where boys formed dots — and dots formed the patterns of an inner rhythm divorced from self. And as we swung into the almost identical gates of the opposing school on the other side of the city, much of our initial enthusiasm had depleted. The minivans lined up in the playground: a makeshift car park, where weekdays saw the stranger games of boys without rules. Our teachers became more officious, showing-off in front of the "foreign" teachers — one of the latter being Hildred. On first impressions, he struck me as only ordinarily tall, but as Brian and I drew closer, we discovered he was taller than both of us put together. His face looked as if it were two overlapping faces, both as ugly as each other, but even uglier by being two instead of one. He sported a baggy track-suit, as if it hid a multitude of sins.

This Hildred made a commotion of directions which our teachers followed in a piecemeal fashion, some of us boys being

delegated to various tasks as a result.

Brian and I were told to liaise with the other team, because, apparently, they hadn't been able to muster a full contingent — and we would have to make their thirteen up to the requisite fifteen, which seemed a ludicrous state of affairs for such an important match. Were we intended to play below par, so that our team proper would be more likely to win? Or were we to bust our guts scrummaging on behalf of "the enemy," which was a lot to ask of us, having been instilled with a fighting team spirit and the overwhelming urge to win. But, of course, winning was the goal, on whichever side we played, wasn't it?

I looked at Brian. Brian looked at me. Our eyes spoke volumes. We had no real doubt why we were the chosen ones to play for the wrong team — and I think Brian almost cried. Picked to be traitors. Because we could be trusted to muck the ruck, or whatever the correct expression was. I slapped Brian on the back as if not to worry. We'd show them. We'd score the winning try that was our own school team's losing one.

Together we followed the boy strangers into their changing-room in Hildred's wake. There, amid the hubbub of laughter and half-broken voices, Hildred shepherded us into some semblance of a team — all wearing the same purple strip and jabbing out our legs in mock exercise just like the professionals. There was an odor of boy and beast, without quite crossing the borderline of stench.

The others told many things to Brian and myself as we changed...although the general rumour caused their words to bang head-to-tail without the sense that those who first uttered them had intended. That their school was under an iron fist. That they hadn't seen their real headmaster for months if not years. That Mr. Hildred often joined them in the hot showers after matches — his underparts they maintained, being more suited to those of a bull or stallion. That there were signs of shaving on Mr. Hildred's back but where the blade had inadvertently missed shanks of tawny hair tufted out. That Latin lessons had been replaced by more Biology ones, which they always had just before lunch. That there were ever only thirteen players available for rugby against other schools instead of the more rightful fifteen, despite there being a strict regime of involuntary games. That the last two visiting schoolboys to play for their side had...

The chitchat was interrupted by Hildred wrenching out blinding earaches on his heavy-duty whistle — which entailed us silently trooping from the pavilion in Indian File towards the



playing-field. The latter's lush green was patched with an archipelago of brown, despite the season having been wetter than most. Brian and I were relieved, however, to discover our erstwhile class colleagues desultorily practicing — with the teachers I recognized standing in a small group, at a loss to take matters in hand before Hildred turned up to organize them. I may have recognized most of them, as I said, but, in hindsight, my school friends appeared slightly different — or it may have been that Brian and I looked slightly different, a fact which had rubbed off on them. Observation can actually affect the reality it observes; a fact I later only realized by means of hindsight.

A certain individual who used to sit next to me in English made a catcall upon spotting our purple strip. "Tomkins looks a real nancy-boy!" said another cheeky lad whom I just about recognized from my school's Lower Remove. He received a clip round the ear from a foreign teacher for his pains, before one of our own disciplinarians had the chance to reprimand him. I was the Tomkins at whom the reference had been directed and I blushed from tip to toes — or I felt as if I did. My embarrassment was short-lived because, at that moment, Hildred marshaled us all upon the pitch between the tallest H-posts I had ever seen.

The match was a draw, which made a change from losing about sixty-nil as was our more customary result on such occasions. The referee was one of the "foreign" teachers who kept disallowing, for no obvious reasons, various ties and drop-goals. The end-to-end topping of the oval ball always seemed to take it into touch whereupon we fought manfully for it in line-up after line-up without making incursions into each other's territory. Hildred was nowhere to be seen for the whole match and I thought it rather peculiar that he was not supporting his team from the touch-line, as the other "foreign" teachers seemed to do — with grunts, if not full-blooded cheers. Once, I spotted a large dog in the distance loping across another pitch but I could not concentrate my attention on it before being violently tackled to the ground by a member of the opposing side, despite being nowhere near the ball. Brian had what I would call a low-profile game; being the hooker, he was often out of sight within the scrum. But that didn't explain why he wasn't in the line-ups. Hildred had, from the start, given me the full-back position instead of my usual second-row forward. So, I was out in the open the whole time, kicking my heels behind my team — and I don't think I felt the ball even once.

I began to worry when I didn't see Brian in the "foreign" bath-house, after the match. He had evidently skipped this act of cleansing, abandoning me to the strange showers. Hildred turned up, midway through our hare ablutions, howling at the top of his voice. I now understood what the others had earlier said about him. I had never imagined that any teacher, of whatever breed, could possibly be quite so blatantly naked. And when he bent his back to me, there the blood-engorged, vein-knotted tail ended. NT

MADONNA OF THE MASK CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

The voices in the studio grew louder. Essai was shouting now, angry. She didn't know why. Mrs. Kramer wasn't *his* mother.

The knife was smooth, but its edges made her sore hand hurt more. She wrapped a sock around the broad part of the blade.

"Doreen, help me!" Mrs. Kramer said.

Doreen pushed open the door.

Essai had Mrs. Kramer by the hair and she was fighting with him. As Doreen took a few steps forward the mask caught her eye. She looked at it. It rippled like something underwater.

Essai turned Mrs. Kramer around and threw her into the wall. Mrs. Kramer said "Oh!" and reeled away. He came up behind her, twined his fingers into her hair, and slammed her head into the wall. The room shook and the sheetrock dented. He threw her onto the floor. One fuzzy slipper sat on the carpet, abandoned.

"Want to watch?" Essai asked over his shoulder. Doreen nodded, even though she knew he didn't see.

She went closer. Under the worn fabric of the jail gray shirt, the muscles rippled in Essai's back and shoulders. His brown hair swung like a curtain of silk as he struggled to hold down Mrs. Kramer. Doreen felt her abdomen, her womb, swell again with the nerve sense that was almost pain. She reached out to stroke his hair. Her good hand fisted in the strands, and, bolding the knife with the blade pointed toward her, she reached around him. The blade entered easily but then it stuck, and she had to pull. Essai screamed and turned. The scream turned into a gurgle. The blade vibrated in her hand. Red ropes of blood looped out, over Mrs. Kramer's white robe, over the wall, over the drapes Doreen had just cleaned.

Essai turned around completely and shoved her away. He staggered to his feet, both hands pressed to his neck. He started toward her, fell to his knees, then fell face down. Blood soaked into the gray carpet.

"Ob my God," Mrs. Kramer said. "My God..."

Doreen looked at the mask. It smiled.

She said, "I'll call the police."

"My God. My God..."

"You'll be all right, Mrs. Kramer," Doreen said.

She stopped and looked at the mask. Had she made the right choice? Would that be enough?

She turned to walk down the hall and felt, deep within her body, in the velvet pouch at her center, a spark of sensation like that caused by a sweet taste, or the sight of the first star in a summer sky. It grew, flooding her, until she nearly fainted.

The joining.

Smiling, almost laughing, her sore hand pressed over her womb, she went to call the police. NT

James S. Dorr is an active member of HWA and SFWA with more than eighty stories in print. Scheduled for 1996 are appearances in ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE (his fourth there), TOMORROW, and the anthologies GOTHIC GHOSTS, TWISTED BEDTIME STORIES, and DARKSIDE: HORROR FOR THE NEXT MILLENNIUM.

TROLLS

by

JAMES S. DORR

Aronson had been poor for most of his life. But he had been raised to be hard working and, if he had a roof over his head now, warm food on the table, and a wife and children who loved him, these things had been earned by the sweat of his brow. He had little sympathy for the "new poor," as he called them — the less than bright, the homeless, the lazy. The people who, in his opinion, weren't even trying to find employment.

"Welfare," he would tell his wife. "Welfare's the problem. They don't *have* to work now."

"I suppose so," his wife would answer. "But I wish you could be more charitable, honey. After all, not so long ago, we were having trouble too..."

"That's enough, Marcia," he would growl back. In fact, the trouble they had been through in the last recession — when they had had to get help themselves until he had been able to find a new job — was one of the reasons he hated the poor. They reminded him too much of his own past. Especially now when his family, too, had been re-exposed to the welfare system.

But mostly he hated the ones the guys at work sometimes called "trolls." The out-and-out, chronically destitute ones who slept under bridges or in cardboard boxes. These were the drab, gray, colorless people who begged for bandouts and rooted through dumpsters. The ones that you smelled before you could see them.

These reminded him of the *future*. Of what he might be, if he let himself slacken.

These ones be feared.

Aronson was walking home one Friday night from Leroy's Tavern — he earned enough now that he could indulge in an occasional beer — when he thought he saw something move in the alley behind his house. He didn't think much about it right then, especially since he had promised Marcia that he would come straight home from work that evening. Now, already two hours late, he had other worries.

But Sunday morning, when he was finishing mowing his back yard, the neighbor across the alley came to him.

"Hey, Aronson," his neighbor said. "You seen that mess underneath your hushes?"

Aronson shrugged. "What mess?" he asked. "You know I keep my property clean." The last he intended as a dig because, unlike some people on the block, he made extra efforts to maintain his lawn and his house in impeccable condition. Clutter, to him, was a sign of the poor, a sign long since behind him.

"You come over here in the alley. You'll see what I mean."

His neighbor, a big man — bigger than Aronson, even though he was no shrimp in his own right — led him around behind the hushes and pointed downward. "That mess," he said.

Aronson looked where the big man pointed. There, tucked underneath his prize Dutch myrtle was a scooped out area, lined with newspapers, on top of which was a dirty blue hedroll.

"You see what I mean?" his neighbor said. "Not that it's any skin off my nose, seeing how it's on *your* property, but, since you're such a neatnik and all..."

"Uh..." Aronson didn't know what to say. "Uh, what is this anyway? How can it be *here*?" He had trouble breathing. "I..."

"I don't know, Aronson," his neighbor said. He clapped a big hand on Aronson's shoulder, then turned to go back to his own back yard. "Now I ain't no expert or nothing like that, but if I were to guess, I'd say you had a troll camped in your garden."

A troll. In *his* back yard. Aronson stared, his mouth gaping, trying to think. A troll's campsite, anyway — some kind of hole for the derelict to sleep in. He walked, as if dazed, back into his own yard, then turned and stared again.

Now, if he looked in just the right place, he could still see the blue — faded, really, to more of a streaked gray — under the largest of the shrubs. The shrubs that were *supposed* to shield his house and yard from the ugliness of the city outside.

He'd planned to watch baseball that afternoon while his wife and kids went out to the zoo, but, when he turned the TV on, he had trouble concentrating on the game. How long had the troll been there, he wondered. Now he remembered seeing that movement Friday night. But was that the first time? Or had the troll been sleeping in his yard since winter?

Then he remembered another thing: that the troll *must* be recent. He didn't go out in the alley often — he disliked its dirtiness — but, every Sunday night, he had to go out to take the garbage down to the street for pickup on Monday. Surely, last Sunday, he would have seen the blue on his way back.

Somehow, that the troll was recent, made him feel better. He went out again when the ball game was over and inspected the dirty sleeping hag and its newspaper "mattress." This time he saw there were other items. A wadded up jacket that served as a pillow. A cheap, cardboard folder that, when he looked in it, appeared to be filled with Biblical tracts.

Garbage, he thought. Poor people's garbage. He got an idea.

That night, after supper, after Marcia had started the dishes, he

took the garbage out as usual. But, after he'd left the bags by the curb, he went to the bush that the troll's things were under. He pulled the sleeping bag out first, and folded it neatly, then the newspapers, and folded them too. He carried them carefully to the street and placed them, neatly stacked, next to his and his neighbors' garbage. Then he went back and pulled out the folder and the jacket, and placed them next to the garbage as well.

He wiped his hands on the back of his pants. That should do it, he thought. Bastard should've known better than to put his stuff in people's yards anyway. Now, when he finds it out with the other trash where it belongs — if he even finds it at all — maybe he'll get the hint.

"Honey, you took a long time," his wife said when he came back inside. "Is something the matter?"

He shook his head. "Nah." He kissed her stiffly.

"The kids are already in bed," she said. "Would you like a beer? I thought maybe we'd watch some TV or something."

He started to say yes, but then he realized that something *did* bother him. Where do these poor people come off, he thought. Barging in on private property like they belonged. Maybe he should have called the cops, except that he realized the cops most likely wouldn't have helped him. Not that he didn't pay taxes and all. But they'd probably have called it a private matter.

"Honey?" his wife said.

He shook his head, no, and walked out of the kitchen.

He went to bed early.

Monday it rained and, by the time he got home from work, the only thought he had about the weekend's incident was that, maybe, he'd actually done the troll a favor. After all, not even a vagrant would actually *want* to sleep in a downpour. Better, whoever the person was, that he find a bridge to camp underneath or maybe some abandoned building. Somewhere that would be dry.

In any event, Aronson had more important things to occupy his mind. The boss had yelled at him at work and, later, at lunch, one of the other guys made some remark about how he smelled. The boss was always crabbing about something, though, and, as for the other, he had had his shower as usual that morning.

Anyway, things picked up that afternoon. Still, after work, even though it was only Monday, he stopped by Leroy's on his way home. He didn't stay long and, when he got home, as far as he knew his wife didn't even notice his lateness.

After all, everything ran a little bit slow when it was raining.

The rain continued off and on Tuesday and Wednesday. Thursday, however, was bright and sunny and, when he got home, he went into his back yard to clean up any twigs that the wind and rain might have knocked down. The yard didn't look that bad, he thought, when he finished up. Not like his neighbor's. His neighbor's yard was always unkempt, with grass that looked like it needed a mowing and, even though it had rained that week, had faded from the lush green of his own yard to a dried-looking sickly yellow.

He had just turned to go back inside when his neighbor called him. "Hey, Aronson," the larger man yelled, "it looks like your troll's made himself real comfy."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Aronson asked. He looked at the

bush — he didn't see anything at first, but, if he squinted, maybe there was a little blue and, perhaps, just a touch of faded-grass yellow.

"Come on out in the alley," his neighbor yelled. "You'll see it better. Me, I gotta go back inside. I think my wife's calling me in for dinner."

Aronson shrugged and walked slowly out to the alley, trying to make himself look casual until his neighbor had disappeared. Then he whirled and ran to the bush on the alley side.

"Oh, Jesus," he whispered.

The hollowed out place in the bush was larger. Again there were newspapers, more than before, and the dirty bedroll, a more solid blue than he remembered. And above the bedroll, hooked to the bush's branches with twine, was a piece of filthy yellow plastic. The plastic was draped, like a little tent, over not just the bedroll, but also an ancient sofa cushion propped up like a chair back. A cushion Aronson remembered seeing that Sunday evening set out with one of the neighbors' garbage.

"Jesus," Aronson whispered again. He bent to rip the plastic tent down, but suddenly stopped. He looked around him — the sun had just set, even though the sky was still a pale gray — and he wondered what time the troll came "home."

He took two steps backward. He didn't want a confrontation. He wasn't a coward by any means, but he knew from conversations at work that a lot of the homeless got the way they were because of drugs. And people on drugs, he knew as well, often got paranoid.

And violent.

No, he thought. It was almost dark, so he'd just leave it be. But tomorrow, or else sometime on the weekend, he'd take the stuff out with the garbage again and, this time, he wouldn't just leave it folded where it could be seen and brought back again.

He turned to go back — he thought he heard yelling. His wife's voice calling *him* in for supper.

He paused in his back yard one more time to stare at the bush, then at the ground around his feet. He kicked at the grass.

Even in the growing darkness, he could tell that it too, like his neighbor's lawn, had faded from green to a greenish-gray yellow.

Friday he stayed very late at the bar. It was fully dark when he came home so he just ate his supper and went to bed. Saturday he didn't feel well, but Sunday afternoon he went out and ripped the troll's things out from under the bush. This time he stuffed them into trash bags, like regular garbage. And then, on a sudden inspiration, he didn't leave them in the regular place at the curb, but carried them down to the block below his and left them out with the garbage there.

He scarcely talked to his wife at all when he came back inside, and he noticed the children seemed to avoid him. He figured that, yeah, maybe he'd been kind of gruff those last few days — after all, he'd had things on his mind. He vowed that, now that this troll thing was over, he'd make it up to them.

But Monday his boss put him on extra hours and, when he got home, his wife started yelling. "Why didn't you at least call me?" she said. "I could have held supper. Maybe put the kids to bed early...."

He growled in reply. He should have apologized, he knew, but,

damn, he was tired. He did try to kiss her, later when it was time for bed, but she turned away from him.

The hell with it, he thought as he went to bed alone. I'll make it up to her — we'll do something special. Right now, though, with the pressure at work, and that stuff last week...

He dreamed about trolls.

Tuesday he had to work late again, so it wasn't until Wednesday night when he first saw the lanterns. He hadn't been feeling that well after supper and thought he'd go out for a breath of fresh air. He went in the back yard and sat for a while, looking up at the stars. But then, when he finally got up to go back in, he thought he heard music.

It came from the alley. He whirled and stared and, through the bushes, he saw spots of color.

The spots glowed and pulsed, not too brightly, but like distant stars that had somehow fallen into the alley. He took one step forward to look more closely, but then he heard voices. People singing.

Trolls having a party.

He stopped in his tracks. Because of the bushes that bordered the alley they hadn't seen him.

He did not want a confrontation — at least not right then.

He turned and tiptoed back to the house, the sound behind him getting more raucous with each new step. He eased himself silently into the kitchen and locked the back door.

This time he would call the police, he decided. They'd have to come this time — because of the noise. Even they would have to agree that disturbing the peace was a public matter.

He went past the living room to the hall phone, then stopped for a moment when he saw his wife watching TV.

"Marcia," he said, "do you hear that singing?"

"What singing?" she answered. "And what's that smell, honey?"

"You mean you can't hear it?" Then suddenly he realized he couldn't hear it either, at least not over the noise of the TV. So much for calling the cops, he thought.

"Honey, you're trembling," his wife continued. She got up to come to where he was standing. "I'm worried about you. Are you feeling okay? You've been acting so strangely lately..."

He grunted something — he didn't remember what. He pushed his way past her and stalked up the stairs. He stared for a long time out through the hall window over the back yard, out toward the alley. He was sure he saw lights and shadows — pale, colored lights and the moving shadows of people dancing — and heard faint music.

He went to the bathroom — he smelled the odor his wife had mentioned. The odor of trolls.

It must have permeated the back yard.

Again he slept alone.

Thursday his boss called him into his office and told him to take the afternoon off. "We owe it to you, Aronson," he said, "for the extra you put in Monday and Tuesday." Aronson thanked him

and turned to go when the boss cleared his throat. "One more thing," he said. "You might consider using the time to see a doctor. You haven't been looking at all well these past weeks."

Aronson left, but he went straight home. He went through the back yard, out to the alley, and there he saw, not just one bedroll, but a whole village carved out under the bushes that lined his back yard. There were tents of all shapes, of all kinds of fabrics, in prints and pastels. There were blankets and quilts and sleeping bags, cut down lawn furniture, tables and chairs. There was cooking equipment on rusted, gas camp stoves and, strung on wires between the electric and telephone poles in the alley itself, there were rows of colored paper lanterns.

"That's it," he said. He spoke out loud — the camp, he knew, would be unpopulated until the night's darkness.

He went back to the house and got out his checkbook, glad that his kids were still at school and his wife wasn't back yet from her own job, so he didn't have to answer their questions.

He went downtown.

He found a gun shop that wouldn't ask any questions and bought a semi-automatic rifle. He had them wrap it until it looked like it was just a long box, and he took it into Leroy's with him on his way home.

He stayed so late that his wife was already in bed by the time he got back to his house.

He hid the gun in the downstairs closet and slept on the couch, not waking until his wife and kids came downstairs the next morning. He shaved and changed and got to work late. He went through the motions of his job in a semi-daze, scarcely speaking unless he had to. When quitting time came, he went back to Leroy's.

He got home late, although not as late as the previous night. But this time, when he went into the house, he found a note on the kitchen table.

"I don't know what's happening to you," it said. "I wish I could help you, but I don't know how, and the kids are afraid. That's why I thought it would be best if we spent the night at one of my friends' apartments tonight — it's someone at work and you don't know her..."

The note went on, but he couldn't read it. He noticed that the paper was damp, as if his wife had been crying when she wrote it, then realized that he was crying as well.

He went straight to bed — he wanted to eat, and yet, at the same time, he didn't want to. He thought he heard music one time when he woke, but he wasn't sure that it wasn't a dream.

He got up in the morning, but didn't shave. He just had a cup of black coffee for breakfast, then went to the back yard and got the lawn mower out of the garage. He mowed the lawn twice, front, back, and side yards, and trimmed the edges — except for the back part along the bushes — on his hands and knees with a clipper. He weeded the flower beds at the sides, wanting, he didn't know why, to make sure everything looked perfect. He scarcely even stopped that afternoon when his wife came by to pick up her things.

"The kids are still at my friend's," she said, standing behind him.

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

He stood up and looked at her, scarcely recognizing her in the coat and hat she usually wore when they went on vacations.

He wanted to say something, but — it was if he no longer knew the language. He tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

"It's your choice, honey," his wife finally said, her voice high and squeaky as if she was trying her best not to cry. "I-I'll...maybe I'll send a note when we get settled...."

She turned, gathered up the boxes she'd packed, then went to a car that, he only now realized, had been waiting for her all along in the driveway.

"I..." Now he could speak, but it was too late. He looked in the direction she'd left, at the faded out tones of the street and the buildings. He looked at his lawn, at the drabness of the clothes he was wearing, the steel-colored sky as day drifted to darkness.

And then he heard voices — loud, happy voices. The trolls. They had done this.

He ran into the house. He ran to the closet and pulled out the rifle, tearing off the paper wrappings. He fumbled the bullets into its clip and ran out to the back yard, out to the alley.

He whirled and raised the gun to his shoulder, then brought it down again. All around him were dancing people. Color and brightness. Motion and light.

He turned to the Dutch myrtle where it had started and stared at the bright glowing yellow and blue of the bedroll and tent, fully visible even through the tangle of dark leaves. Sitting on the bed was an old man.

"You," Aronson shouted, over the music. He raised the rifle again to his shoulder. "You took my wife from me."

"No," the man said. He crawled out from underneath the shrub and stood up slowly. "You left her behind when you came to join us."

"What do you mean?" He swept the gun's muzzle in a half circle to take in the others, male and female, still dancing and singing in the alley as if he wasn't even there. "You have no right to be on my property. That's why I've come out here — to tell you to leave."

"We can't leave, Aronson," the old man said. "We've always been part of you. A part of your heart."

"The hell you are, misier." He shouted now. "You. You people playing the music. Stop and get out of here. Stop, or I'll shoot."

He aimed at a tall man playing a banjo. The man didn't stop.

He pulled the trigger. The gun didn't roar, but simply made a soft, popping sound, and the man disappeared.

He aimed at another, a woman with an accordion this time, and pulled again. Another pop and the music was quieter, the colored lights dimmer.

"You see what I mean?" he said to the old man. He aimed at one of the dancing couples.

"You'd better not drive us away," the old man said. "We're too much a part of you."

He pulled the trigger. The lights and the colors faded again, just enough to notice. He fired another round, this time aiming at one of the tents, and then again and again and again at dancers, musicians, bedrolls, lanterns, pausing only when it was time to jam in a new clip.

"Wait, Aronson," the old man said. "Think what you're doing. Think what you'll be if you no longer have us...."

"You're the one who should have thought," Aronson growled. He turned and looked into the dimming night — the dancers were gone. The alley was empty, except for the old man.

He raised his rifle.

"Think," the old man said again. "Think where you come from."

He pulled the trigger.

He smelled the smell of trolls drifting from him. The air, not cleaner, but just without odor. He put down the rifle and looked around him, trying to go back.

To find his house

But all he saw was a uniform, featureless, unending gray. **N7**

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Kurt Newton has had over sixty stories and poems published over the last three years. In addition to his appearance in NIGHT TERRORS he has work scheduled for INTO THE DARKNESS, CABAL ASYLUM, OUTER DARKNESS & THE BLUE LADY for 1996. Kurt is also Assistant Editor of DEAD LINES MAGAZINE.

WORK OF ART

BY

KURT NEWTON

The show was a bit. Caroline Walsh stood for a moment on the balcony overlooking the crowd assembled at the Wilborough Gallery. The objects of attraction: twelve large canvasses — seven below, five on the upper tier — by the artist: Jeremy Asher. The paintings hung at twenty-foot intervals, each against stark white walls. Little else was needed; the paintings spoke for themselves. Caroline held her hands in an almost prayer-like expression of joy. "...and the textures, they're so...tactile.... Ruminative...."

This was the part Caroline loved best: eavesdropping, playing the part of an anonymous spectator behind the backs of the enamored. She felt invisible...or more precisely, invulnerable. Nothing could take this evening away from her. Not the regrets of her past. Not even the cost, in terms of the toll it was taking on Jeremy Asher himself. She smiled and moved on to the next exhibit and its surrounding clot of strangers.

Jeremy had yet to arrive. In fact, he wouldn't show at all if it wasn't for Caroline's calm insistence. The people who came to see his artwork weren't solely interested in the artwork itself, although a large portion of the audience would be there for that very reason. But for those in the art circles — the media critics and the entrepreneurs — it was the artist himself who provided a face to the name and a personality, however mysterious, to the artwork that was produced. And, to that end, Jeremy Asher fulfilled every expectation. He arrived late — not by design, it was just his way; but in doing so it only worked to reinforce his already growing mystique. Aloofness and arrogance went a long way to establish an artist's reputation. It was as if the roll were created for him.

Caroline smiled at this last thought as the crowd in front of her momentarily thinned, their comments lingering in the air like sweet smelling incense.

"...A lot like Duschaigh...."

"...No, better than Duschaigh...."

God, better than Duschaigh! Caroline gasped. Duschaigh followed Hermecht and Schnabel as the foremost masters in the modern textual art movement. She studied the canvas for which the comments were made.

It was one of Jeremy's larger pieces, entitled 4-14-89 17 days. Although her eyes had scanned each of Jeremy's works more times than even Jeremy himself, Caroline could once again feel her emotions gaining momentum as she gazed upon the intricate work of art. And as with all the times before, her mind's eyes were inexorably drawn along the painting's convoluted course.

It began with the central violence of the craterous rings, whose spiked mountains displayed a pattern of ferocity that could only be described as Nature's Pain. Once freed from this terror-region, one was deposited onto a smooth, almost sinuous sea plain that fanned out in a deep, untroubled introspection....then came another series of upheavals, only this time raised and ribbed, like the underground

tunneling of the blind...until, finally, the trip concluded with a short but unexpected plunge down a vortex of impenetrable depth.... So precipitous was the fall that Caroline had to physically tear herself away in order to catch her breath.

After the first showing of several of Jeremy's paintings earlier that year, Matt Hovarth of the *New York Times* said: "Jeremy Asher's visions not only captivate the onlooker, they wrestle with their very perceptions of thought and desire....It is as if [Asher] has harnessed the power to map the human soul...."

"Caroline, there you are."

The voice snapped Caroline out of her fugue; it belonged to Marjorie Wilkins, Caroline's best friend and ex-college roommate. Marjorie wedged herself through the crowd, over to where Caroline was standing and gave her a peck on the cheek. "So, where's the mystery man?" she asked, a glass of wine riding the wave of her hand.

"Still at the studio," said Caroline. "He should be here any moment."

"God, what a workhorse, doesn't he ever stop? So....are you two an item yet?" Like everything else in her life, Marjorie Wilkins didn't wait for a reply, she just rushed headlong onto the next subject.

Caroline shook her head demurely. "Like I've said before, Marjorie, our relationship is strictly professional." But her tone suggested anything but. Marjorie was always on the look out for the next available man, and Caroline wasn't about to give her the green light. It was a game they played: always keep the other guessing.

Their pretentiousness made them giggle, and like two school girls, they both leaned against the balcony railing and looked down upon the crowd below.

People stood in tightly knitted groups before each of Jeremy's paintings. As they conversed and critiqued, they gestured with their wine glasses as if they were making toasts to the artwork itself.

"God, will you look at this. Caroline, you have got yourself a goldmine here."

"I know. A little frightening isn't it?"

Marjorie gave her an elbow, almost spilling her drink onto the heads of the people gathered below. "Frightening"? It's fucking fantastic! You know, I'm really envious of you. You said you were going to do it, and you really did it!"

Caroline nodded as she gazed at the activity she was responsible for. Yes, she did do it, didn't she?

Two years ago she had met Jeremy at the university. He was studying medicine; she was studying all the young available men that surrounded her. Her goal in college was to find a homesick puppy with career potential and a not-so-bad looking appearance. Jeremy had filled the position nicely — Jeremy with his turtleneck

sweaters and his long-sleeves, even in summer. There was something about him, something odd but special. Just how special Caroline found out the first night they had spent at his apartment. It had frightened her so badly, she nearly quit school and went home for good. Instead, she had gone back to his apartment to look again at the paintings Jeremy had shown her, and to witness first hand the manner in which they were produced. It was then, in that moment of utter, raw nakedness, he had first told her he loved her. In reply, she told him she knew a way that would make the two of them rich....

"Caroline? Caroline...are you still with me?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry."

"Starting to sink in, huh, kiddo?" Caroline Walsh — small town girl makes it big in the art world as leading New York City art gallery director. "How does that sound? Just remember me at Christmas time, you beautiful bitch!"

Caroline went to thank Marjorie for all she had done for her — for being there when she needed her most — when Marjorie suddenly jumped. "Oops, gotta run." Marjorie's eyes were zeroed-in on some point across the gallery. "I think I see the new Mr. Right. Here —" She handed Caroline her wine glass, then tugged at the hem of her short dress, exposing even more of her modest cleavage. "See you later."

"Good luck," Caroline called to her as Marjorie bullied her way into the crowd.

Marjorie looked over her shoulder with a frown. "We make our own luck, remember?" she shouted, and was gone down the stairs.

Caroline looked around her, feeling suddenly alone and set adrift. *We make our own luck*. It was the motto they had adopted in school, to get ahead, to get what they wanted, no matter what the cost, no matter whom they hurt. But for Caroline, listening to it now was like looking at one of Jeremy's paintings: the words began to spiral and distort until they no longer made any sense in her head. After tonight, things would have to change, she decided. She would make sure of it.

A commotion erupted down below; there was a swarm of people near the entrance. Caroline downed the remainder of Marjorie's wine glass, placed it on the floor, stood up straight and inhaled deeply. It would appear the guest of honor hath arrived.

Caroline followed the flow of people down the stairs to the newly arrived focal point. She could see Jeremy's head hovering above the rest; the look on his face was like that of a drowning man. The desperation in his eyes was probably only evident to her, but she knew it wouldn't be long before his politeness turned to anger, so she quickly made her way to the center of the crowd.

Jeremy was dressed in his now trademark turtleneck sweater, white, always white. His slacks — also white — were long and loose; his tall frame made him look like the doctor he always wanted to be. Caroline parted the waves of the curious to reach his side.

"Everyone.... Everyone, please... You will all get a chance to meet Mr. Asber... Just give him some room to breathe — we would all like to breathe, wouldn't we?" Caroline used her firm but not overbearing demeanor to settle the crowd. The surrounding people moved back a step and a comfortable semi-circle was formed in front of Caroline and her prized artist. "Where were you?" Caroline whispered alongside Jeremy, squeezing his forearm. He winced

and glared at her. "Working," he said. She apologized when she noticed the pallor of his skin and the sheen of sweat that slicked his brow. She was sorry at least until she realized: another canvas for the gallery!

She waited until the audience was suitably quiet, then gave the go ahead nod. The first question came from Mark Stevens, art critic for *New Art Magazine*.

"Mr. Asber, little is known of your educational background other than your attendance at the local state university, where you studied medicine. Can you tell us where and when and with whom you first began your studies in art?"

"Mr. Asber is a natural born artist," Caroline told the critic, answering automatically. "His gift was discovered by himself one day. The same might be said for the child prodigy who one day sits himself down in front of the piano and begins to play."

"You say 'discovered.' Just how was this discovery made? And does Miss Walsh always speak for you, Mr. Asber?" The New Art critic looked directly at Caroline when he said this.

"She's just better at it than I am," Jeremy informed the critic, and laughter erupted around the circle. "But to answer your question... I would have to say it was anger."

"Anger?"

"Yes. Anger at the world; anger at myself for not being able to change it. One day I had simply had enough, I could no longer hold this anger inside. And my anger... my pain... became my art."

Jeremy expressed himself with such a calm intensity it instilled everyone to silence. Even Caroline found herself listening to Jeremy's words, watching his face, for it carried the truth behind every syllable.

There was a slight pause before the next question came — this time it came from a writer reporting for the magazine *Art*.

"Mr. Asber — First, I'd like to say your paintings are astounding.... Could you tell us more about your use of materials. All of your works seem to have a heavy coat of lacquer — is this to 'project' or to 'preserve'?"

It had been rumored that Jeremy Asber used, of all things, food matter in order to achieve his textural effects. While other textual artists employed fabrics, plastics, straw or sand, the origins of Jeremy's materials were difficult to identify.

This time Jeremy looked to Caroline for help.

"Mr. Asber's technique is unique to his ability," said Caroline. "I'm sure you will all agree that there are certain secrets every artist must keep to himself. These secrets are what make them the individuals they are — whether they like it or not!" Caroline looked at Jeremy with mock frustration. Then she smiled. To the unsuspecting eye, their relationship was presented as such: Jeremy, ever the artist, unconcerned with celebrity; Caroline, the stern but caring guardian looking out for his best interests.

She was about to continue the questioning, when a spot of color on Jeremy's sweater caught her eye. A red spot. It was at the place where she had squeezed his arm earlier. Her heart began tripping hammering in her chest.

"Mr. Asber, a little insight please into the naming of your work. Take the one behind you, for instance." This came from another critic: *The Village Voice*.

Jeremy turned to face the painting, leaving Caroline's thoughts skittering. She turned as well and tried to focus on the painting in question.

NIGHT TERRORS

At first glance, the canvas looked to be nothing more than a wasteland of browns and greys with red highlights. But on closer inspection the painting seemed to visibly take form. It was a scenario of bizarre shapes and shadow-layers, overlapping in a three-tiered effect. Some of the shapes displayed humanistic traits, others were sheer grotesqueries resembling animals from some neither region. There were impressions of a horned beast contained within the silhouette of a woman's smiling face...the body of a man, distorted to resemble a withering tree.... The painting's overall impression conjured that of the fires of Hell extinguished, but smoldering, leaving its inhabitants scrambling in the dark.

"11/11/91 21 DAYS...", the critic intoned. "I realize this is a little more creative — in an abstract sense — than, say, Clifford Still's paintings No. 1, No. 2, No. 3, et cetera. But could you please expound upon the significance of the numbers?"

"If it were up to me," Jeremy began; he was looking at Caroline. "I would let each canvas speak for itself." There was a look in his eyes Caroline hadn't noticed earlier. A look so benign it bordered on sadness. "But Miss Walsh convinced me to at least supply some reference for the potential buyer." This brought another round of laughter from the surrounding group.

"But to answer your question...the date is the date of the painting's creation. The number of days..." Jeremy examined the painting with a pained expression, as if the very sight of it disgusted him — or hurt him in some way. "...represents the toll extracted from me as an artist...and a human being..."

It was as if he wanted to say more, perhaps explain the painting's true origins and their cryptic titles. He looked to Caroline, again. His skin was so white, so pale.

"Let's just say, Jeremy puts a lot of himself into his work," Caroline added. The audience nodded in sympathetic appreciation.

Caroline glanced down to see if the spot was still noticeable on Jeremy's arm. To her alarm, not only was it noticeable, it had grown to the size of a quarter! And there were other spots now — one on his chest, another on his pant leg. He must have been brushed up against in the initial rush to greet him, Caroline thought, her mind racing, fighting hard not to panic. *Damn him and his white clothing! Damn him for showing up tonight if he wasn't up to it!*

But she knew full well the white clothing was necessary in order to help prevent infection. She also knew, with a sickening certainty, that Jeremy would do whatever she asked of him. Like a puppy dog. Like a poor, sick, sweet puppy dog.

"Mr. Asher —"

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen —" Caroline suddenly announced, her voice much louder than she intended. "— but Mr. Asher is just getting over a bout with the flu and he's still very weak....Please, enjoy the show." Caroline tried to smile her best apologetic smile, but it came across as a grimace.

A discontented murmur spread through-out the assembled crowd, but Caroline was unconcerned. "We're going home now, Jeremy," she told him, as if speaking to a child. She wrapped her arm around his waist and gingerly steered him toward the gallery's rear office.

Jeremy looked puzzled. Or was it an expression of pain? He tried to tell her something — "Caroline...I...I —" but that was all he could manage before the strength left him and he leaned more heavily against her shoulder.

Caroline tried to hurry. Jeremy's face was now the color of a Kabuki dancer's grim mask, powder white; his lips were fading to grey; his eyelids hung like ivory curtains across his eyes, nearly closed. "Jeremy?" she said, her voice an urgent whisper. When he didn't respond, she grabbed him by the wrist as if to shake a response out of him, but her hand clamped down on something warm...and damp, which loosened her grip. A bright red ringlet blossomed beneath her touch.

Jeremy groaned and a man from the crowd asked Caroline if she needed some help. "No, everything's fine," she told the man, glancing over her shoulder, guarding Jeremy's appearance. In desperation she hurried Jeremy toward the office, nearly dragging his feet. There was a couch in there, a place to sit down. He just needed his rest, that's all. Some rest, before heading home...and into bed...to recuperate. Like all the times before. *Damn him! Damn him! Damn him!*

The man was about to grant Caroline her wish when Jeremy's legs huddled. Seeing the urgency, the man rushed up and undemanded Jeremy's free arm and propped him up. Jeremy's eyes rolled as the man placed a hand against his back...and quickly pulled it away, leaving a perfect crimson band print against Jeremy's sweater. The print then began to diffuse, the fingers growing into each other. "He's bleeding!" the man shouted.

"I know, I know, I just have to get him home," Caroline pleaded, trying to bush the man, her voice bordering on hysteria. "He just needs his rest, that's all."

But there was no going anywhere. Two steps later, Jeremy collapsed, dragging Caroline down with him. The man tried to hang onto the both of them to keep them from falling, but his fingers just slid along the length of Jeremy's arm, leaving a trail of blood-wet material in its wake. It was as if the very substance of Jeremy's arm had softened, and the man let go in shocked amazement, sending both Jeremy and Caroline crashing to the floor to a roomful of shrieks and gasps.

"Call an ambulance! Somebody call an ambulance!" the man shouted. When nobody moved, he rushed away to find the nearest telephone.

It was all happening so fast. Caroline sat on the floor, legs splayed with Jeremy's head in her lap. Red was blossoming everywhere now; like droplets of red dye on wet tissue paper, it seeped up from beneath, oozing through the very fabric that had, until now, concealed Jeremy's secret.

Caroline looked up and desperately searched the faces that surrounded her. Everyone was staring. She found Marjorie standing in the crowd with her hand over her mouth, fear etched across her features. Caroline wanted to explain to her, to the rest of them, that Jeremy was just a freak of nature, an aberration that managed to find a niche and lead a normal life, thanks to her. But Caroline could only move her mouth, grasping for words she couldn't make audible. Hopelessly, she watched as Marjorie turned and ran.

In a matter of minutes, Jeremy's body resembled a skinned animal wrapped in blood-soaked gauze. He was still breathing, and his eyes were fixed upon Caroline's face. She was crying now, tears running faint tear-tracks down her makeup, and Jeremy shook his head, as if to say it wasn't her fault. But Caroline put her hand against his lips to stop him. As she did so, his eyelids fluttered and a wellspring of crimson fluid gushed forth, exiting through her

fingers; it ran down the side of his mouth and onto her lap, staining her dress. His entire body seemed to subside just then, as if the breath inside of him was the only thing keeping him whole.

Several of the onlookers turned away and vomited. Those who didn't stood as stunned witnesses as Caroline began to rock what remained of the celebrated artist, holding his head as a mother would a sleeping child, caressing his brow. And as she sat holding him, the respect and admiration — and, yes, the fear — she had once felt combined to form a single, bitter emotion. All along she had known his secret — she had seen the scars, had witnessed the amazing way in which his tender skin healed so quickly — but through it all she had failed to recognize for whom it was all for. She just assumed the pain would last forever.

Caroline looked up, tears wetting her eyes. Beyond the shocked-still spectators hung the twelve large canvases, each against stark white walls: the legacy of Jeremy Asher. Together they had made a mark the art world had never seen...and would likely never see again. She smiled for that, and hugged Jeremy's wasted body close to her chest.

Outside, a siren wailed like a pain-cry in the night, and Caroline listened to it as it grew louder, drawing near, rushing in to claim the dead. **NT**

UNSTILL BIRTH

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35

Naomi wouldn't let the rusty scythes tearing up her belly spoil the rapture, wouldn't let the internal hemorrhage or shock's early whisperings rob her of any moment, any one second of this gladness. She saw the roundness of her gut stretch impossibly, then burst open like a ripe bing cherry, ruby red velvet juices anointing quilt and pine needles alike. It wasn't a pit that climbed up out of her ruins. Rather a beautiful boy child, a tad bit purplish-gray

perhaps, but complete with all the customary parts. And...a full set of baby teeth.

The smile froze on Naomi's face, her vision fading under a veil of cheesecloth. The last blurry thing she saw was the infant crawling, still hungry, up towards her swollen globes of milk and flesh.

"Thank you, Lord." Naomi's frail utterance rode the coastail of her last breath, and with it, renewed credence in the Almighty's everlasting kindness, and the joyful promise that she too, would soon be resurrected. **NT**

THE CROW GANG

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 37

Jerome rolled back across the seats and into the front. He had to get pretty close to the windshield to see through the smear—something he didn't want to do because the glass was melting, dripping in strings and web-like strands.

He looked out and could see their uplifted wings, *pointing, gesturing* to what they plainly wanted him to see. He saw a ragged shape with its arms bound to a crossbar, singed blue overalls ripped to shreds, spiny bone splints gleaming through black and blackening flesh. The eyes had been picked out.

The birds turned on their splayed talons, now pointing their rigid wings in Jerome's direction.

And as the car sizzled around him, the cherry steel oozing through the upholstery of the header and bubbling up through the soft pads of the arm rests, Jerome realized what they wanted, and began to cry. They wanted another scarecrow. **NT**

MALEVOLENCE

POETRY FROM THE SKELETAL MUSE

Issue #2 featuring W. Gregory Stewart, Valerie Hardin, & G.O.Clark. Including artwork from Randy Moore, Richard Dahlstrom and Radical Ron.

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UNSTILL BIRTH

by

KEVIN J. TOTH

Over the months, Naomi Vickers had grown right pleased with herself, damn certain that this time everything would turn out just fine. Not even Mama or the midwife could plant thistles in her garden, the seed took firm root, and its fruit had grown lush and sweet like thick spring clover and honeysuckle. No sir-ree, wasn't anything at all wrong with *her* pretty flower.

And now that pretty flower was just fixing to bloom.

She lay back on the quilt beneath the pines and reflected upon the recent trials of life and motherhood.

Papa used to say "Yah can't change nothin' the good Lord has a hand in.... so don't go frettin' 'bout it." Perhaps the one about spilt milk was more fitting, but Naomi and her siblings knew that if you spilt anything, Papa'd beat the living tar out of you with a hickory switch.

But Roy Seth Vickers hadn't always been a mean daddy, sometimes, when Naomi or her sisters were real sorry-like, Papa'd make it all better by kissing the hurt away. The poor old fool would get so riled, he'd go coughing up a chunk of grimy flesh, more coal than lung. Try as they might, they couldn't kiss Papa's hurt, couldn't reach the moldering peat bog beneath his ribs. Come to think of it, Naomi wouldn't of touched it with a stick, much less her lips.

They buried him in the spring, up near Salt Lick Summit, and the Cumberland Mining Corporation sent Momma some right pretty roses and a card.

Nobody could kiss away the hurt of loosing three children, Naomi knew that for sure, but misery loves company and she had plenty of both. Folks and kinkfolk alike (she realized there wasn't always a big difference between the two) were accustomed to the cruel tricks of nature. Sometimes, here in the ass-end of the Blue Ridge, young ones came into the world sort of special.

If the good Lord felt kind, they'd be born with teeth or a few more or a few less fingers and toes. When the Almighty grew a tad more mischievous, little ones came with heads the size of pumpkins or some shaped like the tip of a twenty-two caliber bullet. Naomi's own cousin Ethan had the profile of a quarter moon rising up over a stick puppet. The whole family lovingly called him "Moonie", and be'd giggle like they'd just told him the best joke in the world.

Naomi wasn't really sure what the Lord had in mind, regarding the other birthing problems. If they never breathed a lick of air, or came so simple their only worry was to eat or shit, then would that be bad or good?

When she looked around her two room shack she saw no running water, no electricity, no beat save for a wood burning stove, and the only insulation coming from the newspapers

crammed into the walls, bold letters beralding race riots and double-digit inflation. Those headlines hadn't much concerned her — she couldn't read — but she knew they did a piss poor job of halting the icy winds of a grim Appalachian winter. An infant might just live through that cold and the pneumonia or scarlet fever it brought, but then it would end up toiling beneath the earth's skin, breathing black death and sowing the seeds of future blight. Sometimes, Naomi thought, the Lord hadn't a speck of kindness after all.

Maybe that's just fine and dandy, but a mother has a burning need to bring life into the world, even if that world or life isn't perfect. Hell, Naomi supposed that a little, feeble minded girl would never have to follow a shaft down into the damp, dark guts of a coal mine. She smiled so sweet then and gently stroked her rounded belly beneath the cotton shift.

Naomi's first two didn't make it past tadpoles. She'd miscarried them both in the outhouse, cramped up as if she swallowed ipecac, and expelled the contents of her womb like loose excrement from a bowel. Naomi took a kerosene lamp and shined it down there. It looked like Mama's blood pudding, and smelled like Papa's breath.

Naomi carried on for a long time after each unwanted abortion, crying till her eyes were dryer than Mather's County, and redder than the splattered mess she called a child. After the second miscarriage, Roy Seth Vickers tried to make his little girl's hurt go away, but Naomi pushed Papa off, knowing it wasn't Christian-like to put your lips down there. The old man must have been hurt something awful, being slighted as he tried to soothe his daughter's pain. So Papa took his hickory branch and beat some common sense into her.

It wasn't too much later, he put something more than his lips down there. He rode Naomi hard, as if she were a greased pig at a carnival, wheezing sour-mash fumes, and coal dust over the crimson welts of her once smooth and milky back.

A few weeks after Papa's attempt at consolation, Naomi knew she was with child again. She'd puke up breakfast almost as fast as she'd put it in her mouth and there had been a missed "sweepin' and a dustin'", that being Mama's pet term for monthly periods.

"Ain't no good ta' be jubilatin' so early girl. Ya know it might end up bad, like befall'!" Mama's scorn rose above the cackle of the chickens she fed.

"Come now Mama, ya' know the thawd' time's most always a cha'm!"

Naomi knew her dogged faith hadn't forsaken her, when in the third month, she felt the sweet flutter of life blossom in her belly. With every new moon, the baby grew and grew. She knew it just

had to be a fine, strapping, baby boy...cause it kicked real hard, like Uncle Isaiah's ill-tempered mule.

And it kicked all right. Kicked the bucket, and that's exactly what they put it in, taking it away before Naomi had a mind to look. She sadly remembered that gray winter morning, seven months of hope culminating in five grueling hours of agony. At the time, Naomi hated the pain most, but later, the insufferable loss gripped her like a cold and callused hand.

The stillbirth might have been a boy, but the midwife and Mama weren't saying. Some weeks later, Naomi felt sorry she'd badgered her brother, Cyrius, into telling her the details. The younger sibling wasn't uncaring, just a might blunt, and a whole lot more stupid.

He said the skull resembled the sunken-in husk of a gourd in a compost heap, rotting on the inside, its roof caving in on itself. Cyrius went on to say that there didn't appear to be much of a brain in there and Naomi took that as an expert opinion. Little brother went on, though she hadn't the heart or the stomach to hear any more particulars. Neither had she the will or the strength to stop him.

"Noamie, t'aint had no eyes, and its nose weren't nuthin' more 'an slits...like some copah'ed!" Cyrius's stare grew wide with wonder and innocence and Naomi saw it through a blur of tears. He went on to tell her that it had hands but no arms, kind of like flippers on a seal, and that he and Papa buried it right deep so the feral pigs wouldn't dig it up.

Naomi couldn't ever recall a more hurtful image and she would stick to that belief... up until her world went crazy, and the dead started coming back to life.

It had happened first near Bluefield, just after that big company plant caught fire. Some folks said it had either been owned by the government or working for it, but when corpses start popping up and taking a fancy to human flesh, you stop postulating about how or why and start thinking more about self preservation.

Naomi hadn't believed it at first, dismissing the stories partly because they came by way of her cousin, Cloyd, being both the father of her child and the biggest liar this side of Tazewell County, and partly because she didn't want to accept another gesture of unkindness from the mighty hand of the Lord. Her ignorance grew like the child in her belly, suckled blindly by the absence of a radio, TV and phone. Hell, they didn't even get a newspaper, and even if they had, they couldn't squeeze an ounce of sense from it — poor insulation couldn't keep you warm or enlightened.

However, like a true Pentecost, Naomi finally saw the light with Papa's resurrection. Roy Seth Vickers came shuffling dead up to the shack he'd called home for over sixty-two years, came casual-like, as if he'd just been called to supper.

Thirteen months in the ground had clearly done him no justice. Papa's lower jaw hung way down and rested at an impracticable angle, like the busted maw of an old coon trap. From the shack's window, Naomi saw the last vestige of muscle and tendon straining like thin chicken wire, threatening to snap and spill the maggot brood that supped upon the bloated clump of meat which had once been Papa's mouth.

Naomi thought she'd never seen her daddy look any worse than when he lay on his death bed, his face a mask of gnarled panic, liver spots dissolving to corn flower blue, as he drowned in

the black morass of his own phlegm and the dust of anthracite coal. No contest, no sir-ree, Papa never looked worse than now, and when she saw what he carried in the ruined remnant of his right hand, she came to the conclusion that things often do get worse. Naomi screamed like the devil, screamed so loud Mama and Cyrius heard it way down at the well. Papa heard it too.

They surely had hurried that poor child deep enough to keep it from the pigs, but no one counted on a hungry old dead man just back from a sojourn to the here-after. Papa dropped the half eaten thing, as if it were a slab of ribs not cooked to his liking. That wasn't at all like Roy Seth Vickers, a God fearing man who hadn't a wasteful bone in his body. But now, you could see those bones, poking out in places where they'd never meant to, and Naomi could sense pure meanness in their marrow.

Papa began staggering toward the window like he'd been hitting the shine too hard and long. Naomi scarcely noticed, she was too busy watching daddy's viddles crawl towards the compost pile, its feeble progress helped not in the least bit by rotting flippers and a mangled lower torso. Trailing ribbons of viscera the color of crankcase oil and rancid beef, the poor thing fought valiantly for life or something close to it. In all the peculiar happenings of the last few weeks, this display seemed somehow routine for Appalachia — folks hereabouts, always tried to carve something from hard maple with a dull knife, forever scratching for something out of nothing, and coming up with even less.

All things aside, Naomi was glad it didn't have any eyes, because then she might have seen the pain in them, and with her sanity hanging by a thread, she surely knew she couldn't suffer that.

Papa might have seen the pain in his own little girl's eyes, perhaps he'd also recognized the bad awful hurt in her scream, and as always, Papa knew just what to do. The scarecrow arm crashed through the window glass, its hand became a shredded vice locked on Naomi's throat.

Papa's voice, far from soothing, murmured fragments of intent, words shaped by a nest of maggots and carrion beetles, all of which, sprayed like spittle over Naomi's cotton shift. Amazed at how easily the vomit came up through her clenched throat, she was equally amazed that she actually understood the habble coming from those decayed lips.

"Leh mah' kiss da' haht ah'waayy...leh mah'." The words came garbled, but even when Papa mumbled, you damn sight better listen. Didn't matter if his breath stunk of cesspools in summer. Didn't mean a hill of beans if he'd been dead for little over a year.

"Leb mah' kiss da' haht."

That voice rose above the droning flies and if Naomi hadn't been choking, both from the smell and the grip, she might have truly admired their maternal devotion. Hell, apparently even those mindless, shit-eating vermin stuck by their young ones, that's something she'd failed to do three times before.

But Naomi had vowed to never fail again.

She brought her hands up to Papa's arm and started rending bands of flesh from it. They came off in pulpy clunks, and she filleted that limb with a butcher's finesse, using fingernails in place of a cleaver.

"Leh...kiss da'...haaht"



Papa wasn't letting go and Naomi knew he had much more than kissing on his mind, and that he'd make hurting seem down right sweet in comparison.

Papa's strength hadn't died with him, his hold began to cloud her vision, but not her will. A mother fights like a demon for the life of her baby and no one had ever questioned Naomi's strength. She'd carried water pails a quarter mile since the age of ten, and she'd cut more cords of wood than most men-folk in these parts. Her hands flew up to her neck, strong fingers wedged their way beneath loamy digits, and she pried them loose, snapping off several in the process — they sounded to Naomi, like a branch Papa used to break off the old hickory.

"Leb...mah..." Papa never finished. His head ruptured like an over-ripe melon, showering gray matter, larva and beetles all over Naomi and a part of the shack's floor they called the kitchen. She stood there crying like a baby, dripping rivulets of vital fluid and insect life.

Cyriss came bursting through the door, out of breath and surely out of mind. He stood shaking, gasping for air, his face flushed redder than beets. He stepped towards his shaken sister and his boot crunched through a bevy of beetles and skull fragments. He looked down at the whole squirming mess and retched up every bit of the cornbread and pinto beans he'd had for lunch.

Naomi pushed past him, stumbling out the shack door, and onto the porch. There, she saw Mama hacking Papa into stew meat with a shovel. In her mind, Naomi envisioned her mother swinging that spade like a baseball bat and connecting soundly with the back of Papa's head.

Poor Mama looked every bit her fifty-six years, and as she undid Papa, her barren gums made the grimace seem almost trivial, though no one could deny the sheer malevolence that bubbled beneath those prunish features. What the old woman lacked in teeth, she made up with garden tool, and with every pound of flesh hewed, Mama seemed to be ridding herself of all the hurtful things forty-two years of marriage to Roy Seth had brought.

Something caught Naomi's eye, there, over near the compost pile. Her heart and puke rose up in equal portions, coming to rest at the back of her throat, unsure as two suitors standing on a porch step. Naomi's baby squirmed like a catfish out of water, blind sockets beseeching no one, idiot urges propelling it beyond reason or need.

Naomi didn't see an abomination flopping in the mud, she saw her third child, saw it helpless and wanting. Instinct brought her to where it fouled the earth, fetid broth and insect life percolating up from what had never meant to be. Madness didn't stop her from bending down to comfort her child...but, Mama did. She threw Naomi aside and cleaved the thing's head clear in two with her shovel.

The caterwauling could be heard way down through the valley, a mournful, pitiful sound that made dogs howl and live folks shiver. Mama had to slap that simple girl, slapped her 'til her hand went numb, and welts raised up on Naomi like Braille on ivory parchment.

Silence, once again, claimed the hollow.

It had been a month and a half since Papa's visit, and two weeks since Cousin Cloyd's return — funny thing of it was, no one knew Cloyd had even left. His grand entrance hadn't the same

melodrama as Papa's. Some joker had blown a hole clear through cousin's chest with a twelve gauge, wide enough to stick a two-by-four into, but had first pounded his legs into bone meal with a ball-peen hammer. Poor Cloyd, never known for smarts in life, had gotten no smarter in death. He drug himself all the way up from Bradenton, through briar and thistle, over limestone and gravel, only to fall head long into the old abandoned cesspool. The mud walls were slick as grease, and its soupy mire, an eight foot depth of fermented human waste, could suck a man down like quicksand. There'd be no encore for this Lazarus. Every once in a while though, Naomi thought she heard the tell-tale swishing and a gargled moan rising up through the still, summer night.

But nothing ever really seems still anymore. Not the night, not the deceased, and, she smiled, not the youngin' in her stomach. The proud mother-to-be worried little, though some said that the whole state suffered this resurrection sickness, that it might very well be spreading throughout the country, perhaps around the globe.

Naomi could care less about any world beyond the swell of her gut. How could she fret about death when life beckoned, when the miracle of birth grew restive in the womb? No sir-ree, Naomi had no mind to let Mama or the midwife or the dead folks, dampen the greatest joy a woman could know.

She lay on her favorite quilt out under the stand of pines near Whistle Run. The soft mulch, the fresh, green smell of resin, and trickling water somewhat eased the God awful hurt she felt. Naomi came out here so Mama wouldn't be sticking her nose in where it didn't belong. Mama had been growing down right hateful over the last few weeks, saying Naomi's child just wasn't good for this earth.

"Mama...yah's jest plum fah' a envy," Naomi's voice grew dim. It got swallowed up in a mist of pain, her breath ragged, leaking out between the whirling bales of barbed wire that made mincemeat of her innards.

"Woohaaahhh...please Lorddd!" The plea echoed down in the small grotto, where limestone sentinels, privy to the wondrous gift of life, seemed to raise their lichen encrusted heads in reverence. But Naomi's whooping cries just carried back to her like taunts.

"Woohaaahhh...every thang gonna work out...jest finnnnee." She'd show Mama, show her that the sweet little bundle she'd carried night close to ten months was picture perfect, and just as right as rain. Those few weeks when no movement occurred didn't mean a lick, the child just preserved its energy for the big, proud moment. Naomi'd rub their doubting faces in the afterbirth, rub them good and hard, till all the defeat they pandered drowned in the musky fragrance of her victory. Life's victory.

Naomi thought she knew suffering, but she realized that it had only been a passing acquaintance — she now knew for certain that, this time, they were becoming truly intimate. She buckled up, twisted around like a hound chasing its own tail. Prayers and blasphemies broke through her clenched teeth as if they were one and the same. Grunting, Naomi thrust her hips up towards the glint of sunlight that fractured the pines. She endeavored to help the child along, but just then it seemed to take a detour, passing by the birth canal in favor of a more direct path to life's sweet air.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 31

Charlee Jacob is forty-three and lives in the Dallas area with her husband Jim. She has placed over a hundred short stories in such magazines as *DEATHREALM*, *TERMINAL FRIGHT*, *WICKED MYSTIC*, *PRISONERS THE NIGHT*, and *INTO THE DARKNESS*. She also has work in the anthologies *BIZARRE DREAMS*, *BIZARRE SEX AND OTHER CRIMES OF PASSION III*, and *BENDING THE LANDSCAPE*. A poet first, many of her stories—including *THE CROW GANG*—started out as poems. She has just completed a dark fantasy novel called *"DARK MOODS"* and is working on getting it to a publisher.

THE CROW GANG



by

Charlee Jacob

Jerome cowered in the red '65 Mustang he'd rebuilt himself. Sobbing. Counting crows. Waiting.

Thirty minutes ago he'd been speeding down the Old Bayless Road, doing about sixty, windows down, radio turned up loud, playing vintage AC/DC.

He made a game of jerking the wheel hard at the last second as he came into the turns, then crushing it into the skid to keep from losing control. Life was good and the threat of losing it made it even better.

As he came out of the last turn he had to dodge a wrecked pickup and he almost lost it. The Mustang's tires churned up dust and rocks, chipping away bits of the hand rubbed cherry paint along the Mustang's lower panels, as he skidded to a stop.

The pickup was little more than a burned-out frame, still smoking, deserted, except for the crow.

The crow sat on a mesquite branch with its head cocked and its round red eyes winking like the shutter of a camera, watching him.

Jerome didn't know why, but he suddenly had the feeling the bird was giving him the come-on. It was so suggestive in the wise-ass tilt of its head, giving him the same look those guys in the movies from the sixties use to give when they pulled up to the stop-lights in their vets or goats or camaros. "Wanna drag, man?" the look said, as eloquently as any words could.

How such a face could manage to leer was beyond Jerome. But he found himself revving his engine, throwing its throaty growl down in acceptance of the challenge.

And in response the crow shook itself with a baughty air, then took to his wings like a rocket. It flew straight down the road, and if it could have kicked dust, Jerome knew he would have eaten some of it.

"I don't fuckin' believe this," Jerome said. He jammed the shifter into first and floored the accelerator.

On the radio Black Sabbath was doing "Paranoid" now, and the blood-eyed bird beat time to the music with its wings. It cut the rocking wind with feathers as supple and burnished black as a leather jacket. The speed of the bird sent a chill through Jerome. It sliced the air as if bent over a motorcycle that didn't need something as archaic as a road. Its wings arched forward then sliced back close to the body, like an Olympic swimmer. It spread them out and didn't flap as much as it pummeled the wind before bringing the wings close to its sides again.

Is this the way birds normally fly? Maybe not, Jerome thought, but then birds didn't normally drag with shiny red Mustangs.

Jamming the gears into third, Jerome finally pulled alongside the black bullet that was the bird. In the hypnotic depths of the Mustang's ten layers of scarlet paint he saw the beat of the crow's wings reflected until it seemed as if there were black wings moving inside the body of the car.

Jerome grinned out the window and shook his fist. "Mankind rules!" he shouted.

In reply the crow compressed its neck until the head practically disappeared. The bones in the wings stretched to several inches beyond their former capacity. The crow made four powerful arches with its wings that changed the very fabric of the air and Jerome felt the breath sucked right out of him. The crow shot forward on pure greased oxygen.

"Damn!" Jerome said. In desperation, he stood on the accelerator, grateful this much of the road was without the turns and twists he'd been driving earlier. It wouldn't do to crash the Mustang into something or bottom out on rises of buffalo grass. For an instant he saw himself going through the windshield, his face hurtling toward a bunch of bluebonnets. What an indignity. He shook the thought off.

"Fuckin' crow," he muttered, searching the sky for the bird. When his eye returned to the road, there was a ninety degree bend too close, and knew he couldn't make the turn. Jerome tromped on the brakes and listened to bits of rock and dirt chip away several more coats of his hard labor. The car bounced over a mound of dried mud and came up on two wheels. It jolted back down and rocked slamming the top of his head into the car's ceiling as it bounced to a stop.

Jerome groaned, then touched his scalp and brought back blood smeared fingers.

When the dust cleared he found the crow leering at him from a road sign. DRIVE FRIENDLY the sign said.

The bird opened its beak and belted out several jarring caws that sounded like laughter. *Beat you I did — beat you — better faster! Crows rule!* He might have been saying.

Jerome's head hurt. Whiplash burning across the back of his neck. He'd been beaten in a race by a crow for Chris sakes, and now the crow was laughing at him. *Am I a man or a worm?*

He leaned across the bucket seat and flipped open the glove compartment. He pulled out his thirty-eight revolver and opened the door.

The bird strutted back and forth on the sign with an air of superiority, flapping its wings victoriously.

No bird could talk to him like that. Jerome shot from the hip, no longer thinking, not caring.

He was sure that the bird gave him a dirty look. *How human Na spartanship here*, the look seemed to say a millisecond before the bullet struck and the bird exploded in a blinding spray of blood and feathers.

Jerome watched the feathers settle, then blew at the end of the barrel like the gunslingers in the movies did. It felt a little like smoking after sex. He did feel better now. After all, the crow had cheated by taking off ahead of him, hadn't he?

He shook his head. No, the crow had beaten him fair and square. That was how guys dragged. They leered and mugged with macho expressions; they dared with words, gestures, the revving of engines. Then one of them took off, and if you took the dare, you took off after them.

That's how it went. Except, he thought, *men and crows don't race*. That sort of interspecies competition had no place in nature.

He bit his lip as he looked at the ruined mess that had been the crow. Maybe it had only seemed as if the bird wanted to race him. Maybe he'd imagined the whole thing, the product of an over active imagination and that six pack he'd picked up at the mom-and-pop on the interstate.

Jerome shrugged and got back into his car. The radio was blaring 'Twilight Zone' by Golding Earring. He heard *when the bullet hits the bone...* and switched it off, shuddering. He turned the key in the ignition. There was a grinding hesitation before it fired up. He could tell from the sound of it that the car had thrown a rod.

The Mustang limped a quarter of a mile before it finally gave up to ghost. He coasted it off the road into a field where corn sat in harvested bundles.

"Damn crow deserved it," Jerome said, caressing the polished dash board. "God, my car. My poor baby."

In mid lament, he heard the revving of engines. "Thank god," he muttered, gazing about for the approaching cars.

But he didn't see any other vehicles. Just crows flying through the air or sitting on thick gathered sheaves of corn with their wings flapping. There were hundreds of them, so many the motion of those wings all at once sounded like a rally of V-8's. Slowly he rolled up the windows and then pressed nose to glass, watching them.

They watched him back, occasionally stretching up on their claw feet, poking their beaks in the air like they were sniffing. Others flew around the Mustang, turning their heads from side to side, coming as close as they could to touch their beaks to the windows, like they were smelling the gunpowder on his fingers.

"Territory," Jerome mumbled, feeling a weird hot shiver ripple up his spine and then trickle back down each vertebra in icy sweat. He couldn't get over how much those tight dark feathers looked like black leather jackets.

He felt as if he'd just rolled into some off-limits hood, controlled by a gang that despised all strangers.

And he'd killed one of them.

And they knew it.

They had probably been off-sides watching the race.

Did they take hets in corn kernels and crunchy crickets? Was this something they did regularly to alleviate the boredom of an October day?

But why? What did they get out of it? The vanquished in a race usually had to give up something. He thought about the wreck

of the truck he'd seen earlier on the road.

Bay, you're losing it. Crows don't have the where-with-all to do a gangster bit. They have brains the size of pop-tops and their peckers were probably no bigger than a baby's nipple — that is, providing they had peckers.

No, these GOT to be some well-hung crows, he thought.

White droppings hit the roof of the Mustang, at first sounding like rain then growing louder until it boomed like artillery and he couldn't think. It splattered the paint until the scarlet was white, then it coated the windows until it blotted out the sun. Gangster door: graffiti and drive-by guns in the same packaging.

How heavy could that stuff be? "Go the fuck away!" he cried, throwing his arms over his head, thinking the roof would cave in any moment.

Suddenly it stopped.

Jerome untucked his head. Then the car began to move. *How? There is no way the crows could be pushing it. Not even a flock of a thousand of them could actually push a steel car, could they?*

Jerome realized his hands were trembling. A shudder hit him. He grasped the steering wheel and hung on, steering it through an arc, back and forth as if he could direct it through a dimension to where there were no crows. Nothing happened. He hit the brake. The Mustang kept moving.

"I gotta get out of here," he said, and he realized that his voice was high, like a kids. *Like a fuckin' scared kids*. He reached for the door handle, then drew his hand back, slowly.

If he couldn't out race one of the huggers in a Mustang, he knew he sure couldn't do it on foot.

The underside of the car scraped, the body bounced. It rocked solidly back and forth as if they were trying to shake him out of it. He thought of cars trapped in riots and of the mobs turning them over.

The motion stopped. Jerome waited several minutes, scratching up and down his arms in nervousness. Nothing else happened. He turned on the windshield wipers and cleared away blocks of soggy white, it mashing into gooey clots across the glass.

It was gross but it wasn't as if they could really get inside to get at him. They didn't have hands and couldn't open doors or clutch rocks to beat in the windows. Yet they had moved the car!

There was a subtle hiss. The noise surrounded him, seeming to come from the car roof and trunk, hood and sides simultaneously. Then the wiper blades were melting. He could see the rosy sheen of the fancy paint job, pitting and puddling in bloody mush. His stomach rolled over and he felt a warmth spreading across his lap and seeping down under. He screamed, crawled into the back seat, and tried to burrow down under the seats.

Shouldn't have shot the crow. It was fair and square.

He stared out the cream-filmed windshield at where crows were struttin', peering in at him. Each lifted a single wing. Could crows point?

What were they pointing at? **CONTINUED ON PAGE 31**

Keith Minnion designs websites and helps produce CDS for the government, in his day job. He has also worked as a Naval Officer and a school teacher. In the '70s and early '80s he sold short stories to the SF markets, then he spent a decade trying his hand at novels. Keith has been illustrating for several of the horror magazines for the past four years, including CEMETERY DANCE. He has also does illustrations for novels. His work has included Ray Garton's "Pieces of Hate" for CD Publications, Richard Laymon's "Wilds" for James Cahill Publishing, and Tom Piccirilli's "Pentacle" for PW Publishing. Keith lives with his wife Debbie and his two kids Megan and Justin "in small-town Pennsylvania with Wally and the Beav."

Killer

by

Keith Minnion

There is a ditch.

In an otherwise empty field of rye.

Below a grey, cold, lowering sky.

Western Iowa. Kansas. Nebraska.

Eastern Wyoming

Winter.

The ditch is shallow, its rich, black earth plowed up all along its length by the huge waffle tracks of farm machinery.

A hidden scattering of geometric puddles, down there, frozen solid.

And the remains of bodies.

Fragments of a man. Pieces of a woman.

The woman's dulled, upturned eyes reflect the cold grey of the sky.

Silence, in the ditch. Silence and secrets.

Then an eyelid moves, shifts, bulges, and a bug crawls out.

A shiny black and orange sexton beetle.

It clings to the woman's eyebrow, antennae waving.

Then the woman's lips move, and with a tongue as grey as her eyes she whispers—

Cal spasmed under his blanket, his eyes opening on a cold, hard winter morning.

He sat up slowly, grunting with the effort. The air was musty and sour in the close, cramped bedroom. He pushed the blanket from him and kicked crumpled, empty beer cans aside to find a flat place to put his feet. With his left hand he ran his fingers through his thinning, dishwater grey hair, using his calluses and the nubs of his ravaged yellow fingernails for a comb.

His right hand, thin and white and twisted, lay limp across his thigh. "My sacrifice to the grim reaper," he had told Ernie, the bartender at the Starlight, after the hatchet men in white had finally let him out of the free-clinic in Wheatland, "gave away a little piece of myself to get a few extra innings, you know?" Small price to pay, I guess, Ernie had said. "You know it, Ernie-my-man. Hell, long as I got one left to wipe my ass and lift a brew, right?"

He shrugged his shoulder, and his dead hand flopped over.

Small price indeed.

A cat rose from the windowsill, stretched stiffly, and meowed.

Cal lurched up, out of the bedroom, shuffled down the short, dark hall to the kitchen, and got a fresh beer from the Frigidaire. He downed it in quick, convulsive swallows, swishing the last

mouthful through his cheeks, in and among the canyons and buttles of what remained of his teeth. Then he spit the frothy, phlegmy mess into the sink.

He looked for blood, but this time there wasn't any.

"You ought to go see a doctor about that, Cal."

"What—?" Cal turned, his wife's voice hanging there in the air, in his ears, but of course the kitchen was empty. The whole house was, except for the cats. His wife wasn't there. His wife wasn't even—

There is a ditch—

He crumpled the empty can, then tossed it to the floor to join its comrades, dead soldiers all. A black and orange beetle skittered for cover.

There were three cats, now, arching against his shins. All the inside ones. The ones the outside cats would tear up if ever they got together.

Inside cats and outside cats.

Cal felt like an inside cat, now. Except to go to the Starlight once to drink beer and jaw with Emke, and to the Piggie-Wiggie on the interstate to stock up after the pension check came, he hadn't left the house all week. Afraid of what might be out there, waiting to tear him to shreds, if he was stupid enough to let it

There was no need to go out anyway, not any more. Not since—

The cats meowed louder, riding his sock up his knobby shin in their impatience to be fed.

"Okay," he said, belching as he stooped to scratch each of them in turn, "hold your horses, now, ladies"

He got the cat food bag and two food bowls from the cupboard and shook a healthy amount into each. Then he doused the cat food with a little warm water and mixed it in with his fingers.

Mixed it in good, for the gravy.

The cats meowed together in three-part harmony. Plaintively; no nonsense, now.

"Here we go." Cal gently nudged their heads apart with one of the bowls to get it to the floor. He watched them eat for a few moments, a vague smile curving his lips. Then he returned to the bedroom and wrestled into a sweater and overalls, and a new pair of Altima high-tops with VELCRO straps he had found on display



next to the pantyhose at the Piggie Wiggie. "Thank God for VELCRO," he had told Ernie when he had shown him those sneakers. "You ever try to tie a shoe with one hand tied behind your back? Huh?" Nope, Ernie had said, can't say as I ever have. "Well it's a pistol, Ernie-my-man, a fuckin' wet pistol, let me tell you."

Outside, the winter rye drove past Cal's property in an endless succession of pale grey waves. The wind coming down from Montana never stopped, out here. He stood shivering in the blue shadows of his side yard with the other bowl of cat food cradled in the crook of his good arm. Above, the cloud cover was solid; it would probably snow before noon. Throw in the wind, it might even blizzard.

Around back he heard the heavy chain rattle and slide, but he ignored it.

There is a field.

In the center of the field is a ditch.

In the ditch is a—

The chain moved again.

Cal turned to the little porch tacked onto the side of the house where the lean-to tool shed met the chimney. He found a mouse and two voles there, laid out neatly, legs in the air, presents — offerings — from his outside cats. The voles were stiff and frozen, but the mouse was a fresh kill, and was still warm and soft. Cal put the cat food bowl down next to them, then turned to the shed, fumbled with the simple latch, and swung its crooked door wide.

"Cal! Don't you forget to feed my baby, now!"

Emily's voice, from around the front of the house.

"I do everything else around here to make ends meet! Lord knows, the least you can do is help me feed him!"

"Yes, dear," he called back, smiling stupidly, for of course Emily wasn't there. She wasn't there at all.

He brought out a battered metal bucket, and a sack of PURINA DOG CHOW. With his good hand he poured the Chow half-way up to the rim of the bucket, then set it on the porch on the other side of the dead rodents.

He fumbled in his coat pocket until his hand closed over the cold brass and steel of the folded bos'n knife there.

His eyes clouded for a moment, and he frowned, clutching the knife in his pocket. Then he grabbed the pail handle, jerked around, and strode purposefully out into the field of dead grass beyond the house. At its center he came upon the ditch, and he went down heavily to his knees in the frozen black earth there, before the carcasses.

He took the bos'n knife from his pocket and pulled the blade free with his teeth.

There wasn't much meat left on them after a week, and all of it was tough, but he sawed off what he could, and ripped off the rest, throwing the pieces into the bucket.

He stood, finally, knocked the clods of dirt from his knees, wiped the knife blade on his thigh, then snapped it shut.

Back at the house he set the bucket on the side porch, then unzipped his overalls and urinated into the bucket, taking care to soak the meat and Chow thoroughly.

His piss steamed like hot lemon tea. Looked like it, too.

He considered the mouse and the voles for a moment, then

scooped them up and added them to the bucket. Then he zipped back up, grabbed the bucket handle, and went around the house to the back where the remains of his garage still tilted — still defied gravity, still taunted that goddamn fuckin' wind from out of goddamn fuckin' Montana — to the place where the dog was chained.

In its two years on earth, the dog — a one-hundred and twenty-five pound shit-brindle Rottweiler — had worn a near perfect circle of dirt in the grass and weeds by the garage. Right now the dog stood at the perimeter of that circle, its heavy-link forged steel chain pulled absolutely taut and level with the ground. One end of it was securely hooked to a galvanized spike corkscrewed three feet deep in the yard dirt; the other end was shackled to an equally heavy choke chain dug firmly into the dog's muscular, rock-solid neck.

The dog stood silently, impassive, staring at him with flat black eyes. The only signs it gave of being hungry were two strings of crystal drool hanging from its jowls, swinging slightly in the wind.

Cal and the dog stared at one another for almost a full minute. Every morning for a week, now, it had gone like this. Every morning he had come upon that fuckin' behemoth of a dog standing like a fuckin' bronze statue at the absolute edge of its circle of dirt, braced at the end of its fuckin' chain, waiting for him.

Seven mornings Cal had gone to the ditch in the field and brought back something for the dog to eat. Every day he had poured Chow in with it; every day he had pissed in it, beer piss, acrid and clear. Or bawked in it, or shit in it. Even puked in it, once. Every morning for a fuckin' week, ever since he caught that bastard and Emily—

There is a field.

Wide, long, and private.

In the field is a ditch.

In the ditch is a fucking, bitching, cuntting slut, and beside her a rutting, whoring, rat bastard.

Or what little is left of them.

The Rottweiler would kill him if it could, Cal knew. He had told Ernie that more than once, more than ten times, maybe more than a hundred. But Ernie had only remembered the animal when it had been a puppy shaking and piddling on his bar, all ears and paws, wet nose and pink, licking tongue. Ernie didn't know shit about it now.

Rip his throat out if it could, Cal knew. Lap up his blood, and eat his warm guts whole.

Hatred was a serious thing; in an animal, it was dead serious. Cal knew that too.

He put the bucket down in the weeds just outside the perimeter of dirt. The dog followed the bucket down, then returned its attention to Cal.

"Come on," Cal said in a husky, broken whisper, "ask for it, you sorry sonofabitch. Ask for it." He nudged the bucket with the toe of his sneaker. "Come on, there ain't much left ... come on, now."

Every morning; every morning for a fuckin' week.

The dog continued to stare at him with its great, black, stony eyes.

"You're gonna have to work for this today, doggo." Cal nudged the bucket again. If the dog wanted to, it could just touch the edge of the bucket with its nose. But it didn't. It stared at him instead. At him.

"Come on, you sonofabitch dog; come on!"

In the end he kicked the bucket, kicked it with everything he had in him, kicked it so hard his dead right arm swung up and the useless meat of his hand slapped him right in the face, poked his eye, and momentarily blinded him.

"Son-of-a-BITCH!" he roared, teetering at the edge of the dirt circle, bringing his good hand up to press against the sting in his eye where the numb finger had poked it. He heard the clink of the dog's chain as a link suddenly straightened, and the perimeter — the killing perimeter, the space where the dog could get him — was increased a half-inch

"Are you teasing that poor dog again, Cal? It's just going to hate you for it. Honestly, why you taunt that poor baby is beyond me! What has he ever done to deserve — Cal? Are you listening to me? Cal?"

Goddamn crazy sonofabitch dog. Every morning. Every morning for a week now.

Every. Goddamn. Morning.

The dog ate the Chow and meat scattered in the dirt with methodical quickness. It smelled the mouse and voles, nudged them with its nose, then gobbled them, too. Then it raised its massive head, regarded Cal silently for a long moment, then turned and settled itself in the dark hole where the clapboards had separated from the garage's frame.

Dismissed him.

"Cal? You leave that poor baby alone now, you hear me? You leave my baby alone!"

On the wind that drove the grey grass seas, that sang through his head like a spray of bot, fast bullets:

"Cal?"

There is a field

The county police cruiser, a new Ford Crown Victoria painted blue and white with slick black striping, pulled into the yard some time after noon on that seventh day.

Cal heard its door slam, then the sound of boots crunching up the gravel path to his front door. He rolled off the couch, and made it to the door just as three firm knocks shook it in its frame. Cal hesitated, then opened the door wide.

"Sheriff," he said.

The thin, young officer, wearing black jack boots, a freshly pressed sky-blue uniform and tall, neatly blocked cream stetson, smiled tightly. "I left my coat in the cruiser, Mr. Tubbs; you mind if I come in out of the weather?"

Cal scratched his belly, blinking. Then, "Hell no, come on in."

The sheriff shouldered past him deftly, and Cal smelled Old Spice and Needsford Oil and the faint, pungent perfume of cordite. He closed the door, then pointed to the officer's Glock snapped snugly into its holster. "You been firing that thing today, Sheriff?"

"Yeah." The young officer's eyes moved, darted, all about the room. "They cornered a coyote in the Reedham's barn this morning. Took four slugs before it went down. Blew its head off. Clean off."

Cal whistled dutifully. "That's a hundred-fifty clear bounty money, isn't it?"

The sheriff nodded, his gaze ranging swiftly over the scattered beer cans, the crusted plates piled on the coffee table before the TV. And the cats, prowling silently about. "Can't award a bounty to myself though," he said. "That's the bitch right there."

Cal shrugged. "I'd take it. I'd take it in a New York minute."

The sheriff nodded again, moving to the hall doorway, glancing on into the kitchen. Then he turned back. "I take it she's still gone?"

"Like the wind, Sheriff. Like the fuckin' Montana wind. Pardon my french." Cal moved past him to the kitchen. "Can I get you a beer?" He opened the Frigidaire and got one for himself.

Then behind him, so close that Cal almost jumped, the sheriff said, "You living on that stuff now, Mr. Tubbs?"

Cal closed the refrigerator with his knee. "It's getting me through." He popped the can, then took a foamy slurp off the top. "Beats Emily's cooking, anyway."

"The way I hear it, Mr. Tubbs, your wife kept a pretty good table. More than one person commented on that."

Cal took another swallow of beer, his eyes bright. "No accounting for taste, I guess."

"I guess." The officer wandered back into the living room.

Cal followed him. "People been telling you things, then, Sheriff? About me and Emily? You been talking us up?"

"Just doing what comes natural, Mr. Tubbs. Me asking questions, and them answering." The sheriff, looking suddenly taller, tighter, turned and caught Cal's eye, and held fast. "A week is a long time with no word at all, don't you think?"

Cal swallowed a rising burp. "Well —"

"Nothing from your wife's sister in Cheyenne, or her aunt in... where's that aunt, Mr. Tubbs?"

"Cedar City." Cal's voice sounded hollow. "Utah. No, nothing from them at all."

The sheriff nodded slowly. "I checked, of course."

"I figured you would."

"And then there's that story Buck Reedham told me this morning, after we bagged that coyote's ass in his barn."

Cal sat down on his couch. Heavily. "Buck Reedham's no friend of mine, Sheriff."

"He mentioned that. He also mentioned a conversation you had at the Starlight up on the interstate the other day, little over a week ago. You frequent the Starlight, don't you, Mr. Tubbs? Run by a man named Ernie Choate?"

"Yeah," Cal heard himself say. Hollow. Dead. Somebody else talking. "I give Ernie some business every now and then."

"Seems you were talking to this fella Ernie down there about what to do if you caught your wives in bed with another man? Or that's how Mr. Reedham understood it from a couple of stools down the bar. Did you really have a conversation with the bartender on that subject, Mr. Tubbs? About what to do about a cheating wife?"

Cal looked down at his beer. "You could ask Ernie."

"Oh I did, Believe me, I did." Then, softly, calmly: "Do you remember what you told the bartender, Mr. Tubbs?"

"Yeah." So hollow. So dead. "I remember."

The sheriff waited a moment, then he said, "You don't want to tell me what you said, Mr. Tubbs? You got a reason why you don't

want to tell me?"

"Hell no!" Cal's eyes blazed defiantly for a moment before they dulled again. "I said ... I said I'd probably shoot the bastard, then cut him up into little pieces and feed him to the hogs." He swallowed. "Hogs'd eat anything, I said. Anything at all."

The sheriff lowered himself to one knee; Cal heard the creak in the leather of his holster, in his shiny black jack boots. "You wouldn't happen to keep any hogs on the property, would you, Mr. Tubbs?"

Cal took in a slow, ragged breath, bearing the rattle of the dog's chain in his head, then looked up blearily. "Sounds like you think something happened, Sheriff."

"Happened." The officer rose. "Oh, yeah. Something happened, all right." He placed his hands on his hips. "After a week some people start thinking about a number of things that might have happened, Mr. Tubbs." He shifted his gaze to the side window. "After a week maybe I've got to start looking at things a little bit differently, if you know what I mean."

Quietly, almost whispering, Cal said, "I don't think you better ask me any more questions, Sheriff."

"You want me to leave, Mr. Tubbs?" The sheriff smiled slightly, revealing a thin slice of white teeth. "You ordering me out of your home?"

Cal stood shakily. "Yeah," he said, "real politely, but yeh. I got that right, haven't I?"

The sheriff nodded, his smile frozen. Then he turned to the front door, paused, and turned around. "Folks say you've been keeping to yourself this past week. Haven't left the place even once, they say."

"That don't mean nothing," Cal said. "That don't mean nothing at all."

"The bartender at the Starlight says you never miss your Friday night beer. Not for the past couple of years, anyway."

Cal couldn't keep his voice from shaking as he said, "I just told you to please leave —"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Tubbs, I got some bad news this morning." The sheriff leaned on the door. "Up until this morning, I only had one reported missing person in this entire county." He held up a long, pale finger. "Just one."

"Emily," Cal said, stone-faced. "I know that."

The sheriff raised a second finger. "Truck driver named Loman, out of Wheatland. Cross-country; big rigs. His wife said he hadn't called in a few days, and the company he hauls for says he hasn't been around either."

Over his shoulder, through the door glass, Cal saw the rye grass in the field, beckoning. Slowly, carefully, he said, "You saying this guy and my wife ... maybe run off together?"

The sheriff shook his head. "That would be too easy, Mr. Tubbs. Too fat, don't you think?"

"This farm was my wife's life, Sheriff. This house, the animals... me."

The sheriff nodded again, with just a sliver of a smile. "Nothing but corn cobs to chew on, then, I guess, eh?"

"Corn cobs? What the hell are you talking about —?"

"The hogs, Mr. Tubbs." The sheriff opened the door on a stiff, biting wind. "Hogs'll eat anything ... isn't that what you said?"

There
Is
A
FIELD.

The blizzard hit with full, howling force by one o'clock, but that was all right. That was just fine. A good, thick blanket of snow to cover things, to keep things for a little while longer ...

He went out into the middle of it with his Dad's old nickel-plated .45 and killed the dog where it lay in the shelter of the leaning garage. It took four bullets, just like the coyote ... just like Emily ... but he shot the bastard's head off.

Clean off.

"I brought it home for you, Emily," he said hoarsely, struggling with the words. "I brought that damn dog home for you, you bitch. For YOU!"

Then he shoved the burning metal of the automatic's muzzle into his mouth, closed his eyes on the sudden pain, on the tears that rolled coldly through the ruined stubble of his cheeks—

"Cal! You come in the house, now. It's snowing, for goodness sake! Cal!"

He let the muzzle fall from his lips.

"Cal!"

"Yes, dear." His words were lost in the falling snow. For a moment, he wasn't even certain he had said them aloud.

"Cal?"

"Coming."

He turned, cradling the gun in the crook of his good arm, and went back to the house, the empty house, the house still full of her, and waited for the sheriff to return. **NT**

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Louise Dragon haunts the deep woods of Central Maine by night. By day, she teaches job skills to teens at a small private school. Well known as a writer of finely tuned and imaginative horror, her short stories have appeared just about everywhere. Her newly released tales will appear in *TALERS TALES*, *THE 1995 SPGA SHOWCASE*, and *SILVER SHADOWS*.

Chester's Control

by

LOUISE DRAGON

"Wow, check it out," Bud Gates shouted as he emerged into a clearing of sorts behind the forty-acre field.

"There's a car down there. I can see part of a fender. See it, Noah? See it? Right under those weird vines."

Fourteen-year-old Noah Chapman craned his neck and squinted against the sun. Half buried beneath a tangle of brush a rusted fender jutted its dimpled elbow.

"It looks old, but my Dad says the old cars have the best parts," Bud said skirting the leafy mound.

"Wait, Bud," Noah shook his head as he watched his best friend approach the snarl of brush. If Bud's Dad told him the sun was going to super nova today, Bud would probably be wearing sunglasses. "What would a car be doing way out here behind the forty-acre field? How could it have gotten here? There's no road."

Bud scratched at his brush-cut blonde fuzz, while his large dark blue eyes blinked rapidly as though computing a solution to Noah's questions.

"Wow, you're right," he agreed. "How did it get out here? Maybe someone was trying to hide it and that's why it's covered with those creepy vines. Maybe it's full of stolen drugs or a bank robber's loot or something."

Noah laughed. Bud's ability to imagine crimes connected to everything most certainly stemmed from having the town sheriff for his father. Noah always wondered about that mysterious bond between father and son. His own father had split before he was born.

"I don't know about that," Noah said. "Just be careful around that thing. We don't know where it's been and how it got there."

"Right," Bud said as he began tearing at the tough vines surrounding the old vehicle.

"This thing must be wicked old," Noah said as he moved in to help with the vine removal. "Never saw such a square-looking car before. It's even got real wood on it."

As the old car was uncovered, flakes of metallic dark green paint chipped off and fell to the weeds below. Greenish mold and lichen grew over the insides of the windows obstructing Noah's view of the interior.

"Hello," Bud shouted. "Look at this."

Bud, clearing weeds from the front fender had uncovered a large boulder smashed squarely between the broken headlights. "Must've been a crash," Bud said, swiping at his sweaty forehead with a tanned arm. "Let's open her up."

"You crazy? There could be dead people in there."

Bud's lucid blue eyes lit up. "Wow, you think so?" Reaching for the tarnished and pitted door handle on the driver's side with a grimy paw, Bud breathed louder than the singing cicadas of the surrounding forest.

An icy chill ran down Noah's back. "Don't, man. Don't open it. Go get your father and let him open it." A mental picture of Bud's father clapping his son's best friend on the shoulder and saying, "good job, Noah," flashed fleetingly across his mind.

"Wuss," Bud said as he wrenched the handle.

Just as Noah was thinking that it would be okay because the door was rusted and probably wouldn't open anyway, he heard the shriek of metal on metal and the rusty door fell open.

The shriek of the door silenced the chirping cicadas as a cloud picked that moment to cover the sun, giving the woods an underwater look.

Noah thought he heard something else right after the door fell open. A clinking sound, like coins or keys hitting metal. The sound was quickly forgotten, however, when Noah noticed that Bud wasn't moving. Not moving, not talking, no "wow — look, Noah," nothing. Bud was standing stock still, his eyes half closed and his head cocked to one side as if listening to the silence. Noah wasn't even sure if his friend was still breathing, it was so damn quiet all of a sudden.

"Bud!" Noah shook his friend's shoulder. "Bud!"

Nothing.

Noah bent to peer into the dim interior of the old car. A black-toothed skull leaning across skeletal fingers that still clutched the steering wheel smiled back at him. Noah's heart skipped a beat. Darker clouds rolled above creating shadowy illusions inside the car. Noah could have sworn those bony fingers opened and closed under the bony head.

The cicadas remained silent.

This close to the car, Noah got a sickening whiff of green, swampy stuff.

Bud's half-closed eyes fluttered, showing mostly whites beneath. His slim, athletic body jerked a few times and Noah heard another brief clink. Not sure if the clinking noise came from Bud or the car, Noah decided not to wait around and find out.

"Bud," he shouted. "I'm going to get your father, man."

"Something's wrong with Bud," Noah said gasping for air after his sprint across the forty-acre field. "We found an old car. Bud opened her up. Told him not to."

"Hold on there, Noah," Mike Gates said, bolding up a bear-like paw. "You guys found an old car? Where?"

"Right out there, Sheriff. Other side of the forty-acre field."

"What..."

"Come on and I'll show you," Noah panted. Mike Gates was a good sheriff but this was a hell of a time to be asking questions.

Bud could be dead by now, Bud's mother had died of a stroke or something. Maybe Bud was having a stroke too. Damn it. "I'll tell you about the car on the way. I think Bud's in trouble. He was having a fit or something."

As Noah described what had happened to the two boys out by the old car, he noticed the sheriff quickening his pace.

"Just what the hell were you boys doing out there behind the field? Tain't nothing out there 'cept trees and brush."

The sheriff face scrunched with worry. Wistfully, Noah wondered how it would feel to have someone worry about him like that.

"Well Bud was talking about clearing a trail back here. He said that right on the other side of those woods are the Catskill Mountains and they're loaded with good hiking trails."

The sheriff nodded, his strides increasing. Noah, matching the sheriff's six feet of height although visibly lacking in the muscle department, kept up with no problem.

"There," Noah pointed. "It's right over there. Where's Bud?"

"Bud? There he is!"

"Bud!"

"Bud! Are you all right pal?"

Bud, leaning against a rusty fender, sported a lopsided grin. Although his face seemed pale under its tan and his eyes still carried a half-lidded look, he appeared okay.

"Man-oh-man that was splendid," Bud said to his friend. "I thought you'd pee your pants for sure." Bud chuckled deep in his throat. Noah, still eying his friend cautiously since he hadn't liked the sound of that throaty chuckle, glanced warily back at the sheriff. "You were faking?"

Bud shrugged and hurried his hands into the pockets of his shorts where they jingled against something metallic-sounding.

"You were faking?" Noah asked again. "That wasn't funny, man. I thought you were dying or something."

The sheriff, appearing not a bit more relaxed, cleared brush from the license plate of the old car.

"You boys head back to the house now," Mike Gates said glancing in at the leering skeleton.

Bud, usually obedient if not somewhat argumentative, smirked at his father and stayed leaning against the rusted fender.

"Come on, Bud," Noah said. "Let's go. Do you know whose car it is, sheriff?"

Mike Gates looked up at Noah, his face as white as the surrounding hick trees, and made a halfhearted shooing motion with one big hand.

He looks scared, Noah thought.

"He knows whose car it is all right. Don't cha SHERIFF?"

Noah glanced over at Bud and so did the sheriff. Although those words had come from Bud's mouth, they certainly didn't sound like Bud.

Bud, still smirking that lopsided grin and clinking metal objects deep in his pockets, looked back with half-closed eyes.

"Bud..." Noah began, but suddenly Bud straightened up and took his hands out of his pockets for the first time since his father and Noah had entered the clearing.

"Just kidding," Bud said clapping Noah on the back. "Don't he so God-damn gullible, kid."

"Now hold on,"

Noah was relieved to hear some authority fall back into the sheriff's voice.

"You just watch your language there, Bud or..."

"Or what, Dad. Or what?"

The sheriff backed up against the car, mouth open.

Noah backed away from Bud also. Pinpricks of fear pebbled his arms and the hair on the back of his neck felt as though it were standing at attention.

That voice. That wasn't Bud's voice. Bud idolized his father. Oh, sure, Noah had heard them argue good naturedly back and forth a few times, but nothing like this... this television voice. Tinny and raspy like Dan Rather with a cold.

Thunder grumbled above.

The sheriff's face looked pinched, like his shoulder holster was hunkled too tight. "This is police business, son. I remember this old woody, although I wish to Christ I'd never seen the old thing again. You boys had best be out of the way. I'm the only one who can explain this one."

"Explain it, Dad. Me and Noah want to know how some poor guy could crash his car out here behind your field and you don't do anything. You're the sheriff for Christ sakes."

Noah looked curiously from son to father. He could feel his heart heating rapidly. Something was wrong with this picture. Something was very wrong.

Some color was returning to the sheriff's face as he listened to the words of his only son.

"Poor guy? Did you say poor guy? You don't know nothing about Chester Gates..." Realizing that he'd said too much, the sheriff lapsed into momentary silence.

"Go on, now. Clear out. I'll handle this."

But the sheriff didn't look like he was capable of handling much of anything, and somehow Bud seemed to sense it.

"Gates?" Bud began quietly. "He was one of us? Splendid!"

"I said go home, Bud. Go home right now!"

Metal clinking noises from Bud's pockets floated on the heavy air.

"Okay, Dad," Bud said. "I'll go. I only have one more question."

The sheriff looked up expectantly.

"If a gun was left out, say in an old car or something. If it went maybe ten years or so without being fired, would it still shoot?"

Noah felt as though he were part of a nightmare. As he watched Bud pull an ugly-looking revolver from one of his noisy pockets, he kept thinking: this isn't happening. I'll wake up soon because this can't really be happening.

"Bud what are you doing? Give me that thing before you hurt yourself."

"I want to hear the whole story, Dad. Me and Noah found this guy and we need to hear the whole splendid story." Bud leveled the rusty barrel of the gun in his father's direction.

Noah wanted to shout, scream, yell and jump. "He's your father, man, what are you doing." But his throat was closed and his body frozen in place. Mutely, Noah watched one of the strangest scenes he'd experienced in his short boring life.

"You going to shoot me, son?"

"Depends," Bud said, although his face looked a little unsure.

"Tell me about the guy in the car. And I want the whole story,

please."

Noah had to suppress the urge to giggle madly. Here was his best friend holding a gun on a guy who was not only the sheriff, but also the best father a kid could ask for and he still had the manners to say, "please." It was unreal!

"We don't have to do it this way, Bud," the sheriff began. "I'd have told you the whole story when I thought you were old enough. If you want to hear it now, so be it. Just put that God-damn gun away. Can't think straight with that thing in my face."

Bud put the gun in his pocket and leaned back against the rusty fender with his arms folded across his skinny chest. His eyes closed to half-mast and his thin lips curled back into their former sneer. "Go for it," he said using his raspy television voice.

"Chester Gates was my brother," the sheriff started. "A controlling identity with psychotic repercussions was how the doctors worded Chester's problems. All I know from living with him is that, to Chester, he was the only one that mattered. No one else really existed for him unless they were totally under his control and allowing him to move the strings, like a demented puppeteer. Anyone Chester couldn't control, he wiped out. For him this was normal and expected since if they weren't under his control, they had already ceased to exist in his warped mind."

"Right this moment, Chester is reaching out from the dead to control you, although I wouldn't have believed this was possible if I weren't seeing it with my own eyes. That smirk on your face, that jingling in your pockets and that word 'splendid' — those are Chester's. He's controlling you. Can't you feel it, Bud? You're not acting like you. You're acting like Chester and Chester's dead. He should have never been born. Shake it off. You're stronger than a dead man!"

Bud blinked his heavy lidded eyes a few times and in a voice that sounded more like Bud he said, "There's more, isn't there? When I opened the car, I felt something. Hatred and rage. He wants something from us. What does he want?"

The sheriff sighed. "He wants you. He's always wanted you. He killed your mother right after you were born. He wanted total control over your life. Chester had big plans for you. He'd have turned you into a sick and demented monster just like he was."

"You were right about the trails out here. Used to be that some of them went right on out to the Catskills. After he killed your mother, he took you and headed for the mountains. The law was after him and it was my task to send them on a wild goose chase while Chester escaped through the back trails. He never made it."

"Look carefully inside that old car and you'll see the child's car seat that I took you out of almost thirteen and a half years ago. Took you and left your real father to rot inside this rusty old tomb which was more than he deserved after what he did to your mother. To our parents. Hell, even to me — it took me years before I felt whole again after he died."

"Splendid," Bud said.

"You left my father here to die and I'm supposed to forget it and go on like always? He wasn't dead when you found him, was he? You took his son and left him here to die, didn't you? I can feel it. I can feel what he was thinking after you closed his broken body up inside this car and left him to die. He hated you. It was that hatred that kept his spirit alive. Waiting for chance to see you again." Bud fumbled in his pocket for the gun.

Noah's voice chose that moment to reassert itself. "Don't, man, he's your father."

"He killed my father!"

Noah placed a shaky hand on his friend's arm. "He did it for you, man. Weren't you listening?"

"I thought you were my friend," Bud spat. "If you're not going to help me, then I don't need you either."

Noah stepped back when he saw the rusty barrel of the old gun swing in his direction. "Listen, man..."

Bud chuckled his new deep throated chuckle. "No, you listen, man. You're about to hear a big bang!"

Noah heard the bang. In a hazy stupor, he saw the sheriff loping over. Funny, Noah was thinking. I'd have expected getting shot would hurt more. And what was that chunk of rusty metal doing hanging out of Bud's neck. So much blood. Why is Bud falling over into that car if I'm the one who got shot? Deep in Noah's brain he heard a throaty chuckle. A tremor coursed through his body and in the last vestiges on consciousness, he saw the bony hands of Chester Gates reaching for him over the prone body of his dead friend.

That infuriating tapping on his cheeks was pissing Noah off. His mother must be drunk again and wanting Noah to go to the store for cigarettes. He tried to wave away the tapping hands but his arms felt heavy and numb. "Cut it out," Noah shouted just before his eyes snapped open.

It wasn't his mother doing the tapping Noah discovered when he looked up into the wet sweating eyes of Sheriff Mike Gates.

"Noah, you okay, boy?"

Up above the sheriff's head the sun was chasing dark clouds across the sky to the tune of singing cicadas.

"What happened?" Noah asked the tired-looking sheriff.

"What do you remember?"

Noah scratched his head. "I remember finding an old car and Bud having a fit or something. I remember running to get you and...a bang. A loud bang like a gunshot or blowout or something. Is Bud okay?"

"No, Noah, Bud's not okay. Seems he found an old rusty gun in that old car and tried to fire it off. The thing was so old it exploded shrapnel into Bud's neck. He's dead."

Tears, not sweat, coursed down the sheriff's haggard face.

Noah felt emotional, but his emotions seemed skewed. He felt sort of...elated? Yes, in control and happy about it.

In the weeks following Bud's death, Noah worked to establish control. His alcoholic mother could not be controlled, so with the help of a fluffy pillow, she was eliminated. The townsfolk concluded that she drank herself to death and Noah was sent to live with Sheriff Gates, the father that he'd always wanted.

The sheriff had been controlled before and Noah was confident that he could be controlled again. Ah, Noah thought, control — what a perfectly splendid sensation. **NT**

Mort Castle has had many careers in communication: A musician (one smash flop album in 1965), high school English teacher, stage hypnotist, standup comic ("I was funnier as a teacher!"), two bit actor, and, since 1967, writer. While Castle cannot claim to have written everything — he has written nearly everything, including all the print ads for a manufacturer of swine confinement flooring systems. With about 350 short works of fiction and nine books published, Castle is probably best known for his horror and fantasy writing, with short stories often cited in *THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR AND FANTASY* collections, and his horror novel, *CURSED BE THE CHILD*, deemed a "classic of its kind" in a five star review in *RAVE REVIEWS*. Current or upcoming: *Stories in the anthologies LOVECRAFT'S LEGACY*, from Tor/Orb, *MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY*, DAW Books, and Angel Entertainment comics *VAMPIRE GIRLS: CALIFORNIA 1969*, *SECRET FILES*, and *DREAM GIRL*. The big writing project nowadays is editing *THE HORROR WRITERS ASSOCIATION: WRITING HORROR*, to be published by *WRITER'S DIGEST BOOKS*. Mort's contribution to this issue first appeared in a somewhat different form, and with the title *HENDERSON'S PLACE*, in *NEW INFINITY REVIEW*, in 1977.

HENDERSON'S PLACE/SUMMER EYES

by

Mort Castle

He carries *The Place* with him always, but it is at night, in dreams, that Henderson sees it most vividly:

A secret place, a hidden-away place, a place far from this universe that has gone to concrete and neon and plastic.

A time-out place, a time-slowed and time-melted place.

Dew-gleaming grass. Sky a layered blue. Tall trees. The easy slope to the brook where water flows snake-softly over flat stones.

This is Henderson's Place.

It is his, his alone.

Except for the one with whom he is meant to share it.

Who is:

The Girl with the Summer eyes.

Who is —

in dreams —

With Henderson, in Henderson's Place

Who is:

of *The Place* —

So Henderson sees *The Place* in his dreams.

But dreams end with, "For Chrissake, I've called you three times. Will you puh-leeze get up?"

Will he get up? He asks himself that question as he opens his eyes.

Another beckoning from down the hall, the kitchen: "Come on!"

Henderson rises. In his pajamas, he goes to the window, raises the shade, almost expecting to see summer, but though the sun shines, there is a flatness to the day that tells him this is autumn.

In the bathroom, he lets the shower run, very hot, while he stands naked at the vanity, razor in hand, face lathered with aerosol propelled cream that smells like burnt plastic. The mirror fogs. He erases an oval of mist, erases another patch, sees stubbly cheek, shaves it. Another clear spot, the razor again, and so until his face is smooth. He sees a cut on his chin, a line of blood. It does not hurt at all.

A few minutes later, he is dressed and in the kitchen. His wife, in housecoat and slippers that snap against her heel when she walks, gives him a paper plate with two breakfast tarts on it and places a cup of coffee on the table. She says it is harder to wake him than it is to raise the dead.

Henderson's teeth crack the tasteless toaster-tart shell. He looks at his wife's eyes. They are as hard and lifeless as the brown glass of a beer bottle.

"Going to the office or do you have calls to make?"

A salesman for Educational Enterprises, Incorporated, Henderson goes to the office on some days. On other days he visits schools. He doesn't recall where he is to go today.

"Well?" At the counter, his wife pours herself coffee. She yawns. "I swear, I don't know what's gotten into you. You act like you're missing half of what's going on."

Henderson smiles, enjoys his so secret, so special knowledge of *The Place*.

Soon he is on the tollway, going to, going to ... The office. That's right.

In the rush hour traffic, he pulls into line at a toll booth behind a new, blue Chevrolet Impala. The sun's reflection on the Chevrolet's bumper is a blazing fireball that pulses in a steady, insistent rhythm.

Suddenly a horn blares. Now there are three lengths between him and the Chevrolet. Henderson pulls up. The Impala is under the toll booth's concrete column supported roof — in the shade.

The flashing, compelling fire-eye is gone.

When third period ends, Linda and Karen, her best friend, go to the "safe" restroom where teachers seldom bother to check for smokers.

"God!" Linda says, "Wagner's class is a total bore!" She stands at the mirror combing her shoulder length blond hair.

"Bummer," Karen agrees. She lights a Kool, rests her blue-jeaned backside on the edge of a sink. "School is one big bummer. Totally."

"Yeah," Linda says. "How come if school is supposed to be for kids, we all hate it?"

"That's the American way," Karen says. "If it's horrible, it's supposed to be good for you." She waves her hand. Her cigarette is a baton and she is conducting an orchestra, singing, "My country misery, why you keep shafting me..."

Linda giggles. She looks at the mirror. She decides she is pretty. Well, not pretty exactly, but she has nice, even features. Clear skin, thank God. And — no brag, just fact — she does have pretty eyes — big and green.

And so if she is young and pretty — almost pretty — and she is — if she is exactly the way an American teen ought to be — and she is —

Upper-middle class family. Room of her own. College education guaranteed by parents' careful financial planning —

Then just why does she feel so damned shitty so damned often? She gets up, goes to school, comes home, breezes through homework. She dates on weekends — guys she likes "okay" and her parents don't much dislike — and all in all, she has what is supposed to be a "pretty fun time."

And Linda she feels like a zombie in a grade-Z horror movie, just walking through it, walking through all of it.

Feeling nothing.

Nothing.

"Hey, Kar?"

"Hey what?"

"Want to ditch next hour? I don't feel like my daily dose of American history."

"Yeah. Okay."

"We can stay here and smoke a little. You got stuff, don't you?"

Karen laughs. "For sure."

They light a joint as the bell rattles the washroom windows.

At the desk in the office he shares with four others, Henderson takes invoices from a wire basket on his left and transfers them to a basket on the right. He glances at a brochure for Educational Enterprises's new United States history text and discovers that not one word in the first sentence of the copy is related to any other word.

Henderson looks around. It's as though everyone and everything in the office were pressed between two sheets of glass, flat — two-dimensional, like a television cartoon.

"Henderson, what are you doing here?"

Tom Beamer, sales manager, has suddenly appeared.

"Nothing," Henderson says.

"You were supposed to... Say, Henderson, something bothering you?"

"Oh, no," Henderson says, "everything is fine."

Yes, Yes indeed. Everything is fine. He has *The Place*. And it comes to him that, why, whenever he wishes, he can go to *The Place*, flee this drab, silly, and — Oh so strangely flat — world.

Yes. *The Place*.

"...appointment, Henderson. It's big. They want to toss out all the texts they're using and kick in a whole new line across the grades, one through twelve. And Henderson, that's one school district with serious money."

Henderson folds his hands on the desk. Beamer glances at

his wristwatch.

"...get moving, right? Don't want to be late."

Beamer is still talking. Henderson can see the mouth open and close in the flat face. Beamer's voice fades away and then ... is gone —

And Henderson hears:

the bubbling of water skipping across stones.

Henderson pushes back his chair. He stands and smiles at Beamer.

Beamer's open mouth stays that way. "Now," Henderson says, "I forget. Where am I supposed to go?" Henderson forces himself to hear the sales manager.

Tom Beamer says, "Christ, Henderson."

water over stones

"Look we can send Martelli out on this. I can go myself. It's okay."

"Oh no," Henderson says. "That's all right. That's all right. I'm already on the way."

He has The Place. Its serenity fills him, and he pities poor Beamer, who does not know, cannot know, has nothing. Blue sky, tall trees, water over stones.

"Where should I go?" Henderson says.

"Pine Forest High School."

Henderson walks to the door, turns, gazes back at the office where everyone has become trapped in a gigantic ant farm, sandwiched between the transparent glass walls.

Then Henderson laughs.

They are sitting on the window ledge, passing the third joint. From time to time, others have come in, some to sneak a cigarette, most to use the facilities, a couple to share a hit with them. No teachers have spot-checked, though, and while some of the "goody two-shoes" have given them nasty looks, there is no need to worry about anyone playing "narc." Pull that shit at Pine Forest High and poof! Ostracism — instant exile.

"I don't know," Karen says. "Guess it's sixth period."

"Huh?"

"See, you asked me what time it was — well, what time it is — well, really was 'cause it takes a while, you know how it is with time. It's funny. Really."

"Oh," Linda says. "I am *totally* destroyed. This is excellent shit." She takes the joint from Karen and decides she doesn't like or dislike being destroyed. It's just another way to be, that's all.

But to be ... what?

That is the question.

Nothing.

That is the answer.

"Let's play," Karen says.

"Play what?" Linda shifts her weight. The window ledge is hard.

"What do we play when we're stoned?"

"Nah, I don't want to."

"Sure you do."

"Sure I don't."

Linda has a chill.

"Come on," Karen says. "The only time you can really talk is when you get stoned, right? It's no bullshit time. Let's play the Truth Game."

"Uh-uh," Linda says. She is colder now, and she has a sudden moment of absolute clarity, of shining frozen vision. They must play the Truth Game. It is meant to be.

"Please," Karen says. "I want to talk and we are best friends and everything."

"Okay," Linda says, "but you have to start."

"True-true-true," Karen says. She whispers, "You know that party last Saturday? You couldn't go."

"Yeah. I was grounded."

"Well, everyone got real crazy. Drinking and smoking. There was this guy, Marty. He goes to Ridge School. He's a senior. He was pretty nice, I guess." A pause for air. "So anyway, it was him. Marty. And" — words rushed together, true-true-true — "I'm not a virgin anymore, you know?"

"Oh, Karen," Linda says. "Oh."

Karen sighs. "Now it's your turn."

As Henderson drives, all color is fading from the world. At last, he sees only black and white and gray. Objects with dim, shimmering outlines.

Henderson amuses himself by blinking. In that fraction of a second that his eyes are closed, The Place springs magnificently into view, into life.

The grass is a throbbing green. The brook is a billion diamond encrusted hearts, beating, beating, beating. The life force of the trees roars through the veins in their leaves.

A horn screams behind Henderson as he drifts into the left lane. He swings back. A Pontiac passes, the faceless driver — no more depth to him than to a sheet of paper — gives Henderson the finger.

Henderson's hand moves to the radio. A click — then the song of the breeze through treetops water over stones

and now — so complete the vision —

The Place. And The Girl with the Summer Eyes

who waits for him

Now

who sings — her song, his song — the Song of The Place

Henderson, Henderson, Henderson

Come now Henderson...

Soon, then, soon Henderson will make the certain journey to The Place.

He will be there with The Girl with the Summer Eyes.

But there is yet something he must do, something to be taken care of in the flat world, this world without color, this dead world.

Lines wriggle and take on a rectangular shape. For an instant there are letters: *Pine Forest Exit.*

Henderson slows and pulls onto the exit ramp.

"True-true-true," Karen says.

"Okay," Linda says. The memory comes welling up from so deep within.

It has been with her a long time, buried, and re-buried, and it is only now, the Truth Game, that she can dredge it up, vomit it out.

Yes, the dope has opened the door to understanding. All is clear. She can perceive the wispy connections between things that were and thing that are and things that will be — and won't be.

She understands. She sees herself not as she appears to be but as she is. The real Linda. Someone so different. Someone so bad.

"You know how down from our house it's so woodsy and everything?"

She is talking. No, the fake Linda, the go-to-school, big-eyed, nearly pretty Linda is talking. That is not who she really is...

"I was six years old, I guess."

She is stalling. She is not playing the Game. She is keeping the Truth inside.

"I was playing down there. By myself. Dad said I couldn't go there alone, but I did. I found this nest that fell out of a tree. There were three baby birds."

Linda closes her eyes.

It happens again. It happens as it happened. As it was, is, will be. It happens.

The baby birds are ugly, scraggly heads tipped back, beaks open impossibly wide in constant, noisy demand. She stoops, takes a bird in her hand. Its heart beats like a frantic moth at a lighted window.

"Stop that," she says. It continues its cry. She is so much bigger than the bird but it will not be quieted.

She tightens her hand, squeezing. The baby bird's body makes the small noise of potato chips being crunched, of autumn's dead leaves underfoot. Something oozes from the bird's beak and the bird is silent.

Linda is crying.

"Hey, come on, kid," Karen says. "It's the grass, Lin. It's got you paranoid or something. It's no big deal, okay? Really!"

The bell rings.

Henderson pulls into the parking lot as other cars — like faint pencil strokes — pull out. He parks in a space for "Visitors" and notes the irony. There is a rushing all about him as he walks to the two dimensional building.

He goes in and finds the office.

"May I help you?"

Squinting, Henderson is able to discern an outline, empty, like a hurried cartoon. A woman.

"I'm Henderson. Educational Enterprises."

The woman consults an appointment book on the desk. "Mr. Henderson, Mr. Thompson, that's the curriculum director for the district, you know, thought you weren't coming. You are two hours late, after all. Mr. Thompson is gone for the day. School's out. Everyone is going home now."

It is time for Henderson to go, too.

To The Place.

"Hey, that was the last bell, Lin. We've got to move it to catch the bus."

Linda has finished crying. She is free and weightless. Now she wants to be alone, just for a little while. "You know, Karen, to get my head together. Go ahead. I'll catch up with you."

"You okay?"

"Sure. You go ahead."

Karen turns to leave, then looks back. "Linda..."

"Don't worry," Linda says. "It's all right."

Then Linda is alone. Shit, that grass did a number on her, she thinks. Crazy thinking; paranoia-plus! Baby birds and a six year

NIGHT TERRORS

old kid and it was just something that happened, that's all.
That's all.

Henderson wonders why he has wasted so much time in this vanishing nowhere when he has — has always had — The Place. He will not delay another moment. He steps out of the office. He is on his way.

Color explodes before him. Green. Golden. Warm pinks. In this world of flat and gray, Henderson sees life.

Sees:

The Girl with the Summer Eyes.

Eyes of wonder and excitement. Eyes meant to gaze upon the forever beauty of The Place. The Place.

And that is why — She is here — He is here — Now It is here — that they are meant to find each other

Now

Henderson

and The Girl with the Summer Eyes

Well, shit, she could wait for the late bus, but God! All she wants to do is get home, lock herself in her room, and sleep until there's not one single scrambled-up thought left rolling through her mind. She will ask him for a ride. He's got to be a new teacher. He's got a suit and tie. There are more than 170 teachers on the staff so you can't know them all. This guy might be one of the poor dudes who gets stuck teaching the Neanderthals in the shop classes.

"Say, I missed the bus. I live close. Could you give me a ride?"

The way he's looking at her makes Linda wonder if the guy can tell she's still pretty stoned. "My name is..."

"I know you," he says.

It's weird with teachers, Linda thinks. They always seem to know everyone whether or not they've had them in class.

"You come with me," he says.

Henderson is surprised that she has to give directions. He thought he'd be able to find the route to The Place simply by listening to, following, the sound of water over stones.

But she says, "Left," and "You go right here," and he drives. When the car turns onto a narrow gravel road, he knows — he knows — that they are close.

Ahead, colors glow, there, where the branches hang heavy. He presses down hard on the gas pedal.

Then

"Why are we stopping here?" Linda asks. She does not want to be here.

Here is where a baby bird dies

"This is The Place."

She understands that he knows, knows everything. This is where it has all been leading, has always been leading, the end of the path found in dark woods when she was six years old.

They get out of the car. He takes her hand, leads her into the trees.

Something is wrong. Henderson does not see the brook, does

not hear the water over stones. Something is wrong.

Yet he is here.

He is here with *The Girl with the Summer Eyes.*

He touches her.

She screams.

She knows it is all crazy. It is something that should not be happening. The goddamned grass has made her think crazy.

She has to get away from him.

She screams.

She has to stop that. She must stop screaming, the Girl with the Summer Eyes. It is all going wrong. He feels the grass wither beneath his feet. The trees are disappearing, growing dim. The color, the color drips away.

"Please," he says, "please stop." His hand covers her mouth. He holds her and pushes her and tips back her head.

Something breaks inside her. She knows the sound: autumn's dead leaves underfoot.

She lies on colorless grass. Her eyes are closed. Henderson is confused. Something has gone wrong.

Henderson has — somehow — made a mistake.

This is not The Place.

It is only

Her Place. **NT**





NIGHT TERRORS

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